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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

# THE RELIGIOUS POETRY OF R. S. THOMAS

BY

JANIS DARLENE PETERSON

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA
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ISBN 0-315-88218-2

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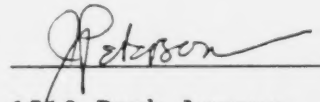

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "The Religious Poetry of R. S. Thomas," submitted by Janis Darlene Peterson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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June 28, 1993

DEDICATION

To Alan, Erik, and Alison
for their patience, help, and sacrifices,
which enabled me to complete my studies

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the religious poetry of the Welsh Anglican poet R. S. Thomas, successor to Dylan Thomas as the foremost Anglo-Welsh poet. Writing in a secular world that is often hostile or indifferent to Christianity and to Christian poetry, Thomas reinterprets, extends, and reinvigorates his religious and literary traditions during the course of a rigorously honest search for understanding of the human condition, for knowledge and experience of God, and for the meaning of his priestly vocation. Adopting a thematic approach, this study divides Thomas's religious verse into five main subjects: his exploration of the nature of human life; his use of myth; dichotomies in his religious belief; priest and poet; and his use of science. The six dichotomies examined are faith and doubt, absence and presence, silence and speech, the apophatic and cataphatic traditions of theology and mysticism, the Deus absconditus and Deus revelatus, and the personal and the impersonal conceptions of God. The poems that illuminate each subject are discussed and related to religious and literary traditions, including such matters as symbols, metaphors, allusions, techniques, and the traditions of English prayer-poetry, mythic poetry, and priest-poetry. The study concludes that Thomas's greatest contribution to English religious poetry is his intelligent engagement with the concepts, method, and metaphors of science, particularly of the new science, and that he is the most important Christian poet of later twentieth-century Britain.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Sam Rees, for his unfailing kindness and patience over the last five years, and Professor Richard Hoffpauir for the care with which he scrutinised my writing, especially my use of "which" and "that." Thanks are due also to Professor Roger Nostbakken, president of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, for his willingness to answer my questions about theology, and to Professor Mikelis Bickis of the Department of Mathematics, University of Saskatchewan, for his clear and enthusiastic discussion of such mathematical matters as Gödel's Theorem. Any errors in my references to theology or mathematics are, of course, my own. Finally, to Wayne and Deb Peterson and to Terri and Grange Taylor goes my gratitude for friendship, food, and a warm bed on my many trips to Edmonton.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SF . . . . . The Stones of the Field (1946)

AL . . . . . An Acre of Land (1952)

SYT. . . . . Song at the Year's Turning (1955)

PS . . . . . Poetry for Supper (1958)

T. . . . . Tares (1961)

BT . . . . . The Bread of Truth (1963)

P. . . . . Pietà (1966)

NBF. . . . . Not That He Brought Flowers (1968)

H. . . . . H'm (1972)

YO . . . . . Young and Old (1972)

LS . . . . . Laboratories of the Spirit (1975)

WI . . . . . The Way of It (1977)

F. . . . . Frequencies (1978)

BHN. . . . . Betweeen Here and Now (1982)

LP . . . . . Later Poems 1972-1982 (1983)

EA . . . . . Experimenting with an Amen (1986)

WA . . . . . Welsh Airs (1987)

ERS. . . . . The Echoes Return Slow (1988)

# INTRODUCTION

Anglo-Welsh poet and priest R. S. Thomas is one of the major figures in contemporary British poetry. Since his first work was published in 1939, the prolific Thomas has produced a steady flow of sensitive, intelligent, challenging poems, sometimes lyrical, meditative, even mystical, sometimes angry, harsh, grim to the point of being revolting in detail, occasionally witty and sophisticated, but always deeply, painfully honest. His work has won him many awards, including the Heinemann Award of the Royal Society of Literature (1959), the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry (1964), the Welsh Arts Council Prize for Poetry (1968), and the Cholmondeley Award (1978).

The son of an English-speaking Welsh sailor, Ronald Stuart Thomas was born in Cardiff in 1913 and grew up in Holyhead, Anglesey. He read classics at the University College of North Wales in Bangor, then theology at St. Michael's College, Llandaff, Cardiff, being ordained a priest in the Church in Wales (that is, the Anglican church) in 1936. After working as a curate for seven years, during which time he married the painter Mildred Eldridge, he became rector of a church in Manafon in north-central Wales in 1942. It is here that he began to learn Welsh, had a son Gwydion in 1945, and published his first volumes of verse, The Stones of the Field (1946), An Acre of Land (1952), and The Minister (1953). These three were later published together, with some omissions and additions, as Song at the Year's Turning in 1955.

In 1954, Thomas moved farther west to St. Michael's, Eglwysfach as vicar and published Poetry for Supper (1958), Tares (1961), Bread of Truth (1963), and Pietà (1966). His last period as vicar, from 1967 to 1978, was spent at Eglwys Hywyn Sant in Aberdaron, on the tip of the Lleyn Peninsula at the north-west corner of Wales. Here he wrote Not That He Brought Flowers (1968), H'm (1972), a volume of poems for young readers entitled Young and Old (1972), What is a Welshman? (1974), Laboratories of the Spirit (1975), The Way of It (1977), and Frequencies (1978). He retired from the priesthood in 1978 and lives near Aberdaron at Y Rhiw. He has continued to write, producing two volumes of poems on paintings, Between Here and Now (1981) and Ingrowing Thoughts (1985), three collections of poems, Destinations (1985), Experimenting with an Amen (1986), and Welsh Airs (1987), and the autobiographical The Echoes Return Slow (1988), which pairs on facing pages a short prose piece with a thematically-related poem.

Thomas's work focuses on two main subjects: Wales and God, and it is with the poems on the second subject that

this thesis is concerned. Thomas is a major Christian poet, though not an orthodox one.[1] His poetry is of great interest and importance because it expresses a sensitive, intelligent man's struggles to believe and to communicate that belief to a world that is at best indifferent, if not outright hostile. Twentieth-century Western civilisation provides stony soil for the seed of Christian poetry. It has been widely believed that this is a post-Christian, desacralized world in which God, if not actually dead, is at least absent or marginalised, an irrelevance. The natural world is a self-contained realm to be explained wholly in terms of natural laws, without need of the "God-hypothesis" or room for divine interventions (with the very faint and vague possibility, for some cosmologists, of a divine role in the Big Bang). American death-of-God theologian Gabriel Vahanian writes, "Scientifically, culturally, and theologically, it is impossible to identify God as the prime mover or the universal sustainer of the world of phenomena."[2] Nature has thus been severed from its ancient link with the divine, whether conceived as immanent, transcendent, or both, and loses its aura of the sacred or holy, to become merely matter. Natural theology is dead. To rephrase Hopkins, the world has been drained of the grandeur of God. (I shall discuss in Chapter 6 the contemporary reversal of this trend among some physicists.)

Similarly, human life and society have come to be viewed as explainable and workable without reference to God. In Alan Sinfield's analysis of contemporary Britain, God and religion have been pushed to the margins of modern industrial society, religious symbols and practices no longer serve as the sacred legitimation of social arrangement, and transcendent values have become located in personal experiences.[3] As the Mass Observation survey of 1947 in Britain observed, "'religion . . . has in the minds of the great majority, become simply irrelevant to the question of living. It seems to have no connection with life and no relation to the real day-to-day problems of modern society.'"[4] It is not surprising that in a 1979 survey by the Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism, only 18% of British adults called themselves church members and only 11% attended regularly.[5] Church historian Paul Welsby calls Britain one of the most secular countries in Europe.[6]

The slow marginalisation of religion and God in the Western world has been accompanied and partly caused by the advancement of science. Science has become in some ways the western religion, possessing the authority to promulgate a world-view, provide solutions to problems, determine the meaning of events, and declare competing explanations and methods of interpretation heretical. The empiricism, objectivity, and materialism of classical science have dominated Western ways of thought until quite recently. The popular mind still associates science with these qualities more than

with intuition and the subjectivity, uncertainty, quirky irrationality, and paradoxes of the new science. Though the prestige, power, and authority of science continue and influence other disciplines (for example, literary criticism) to emulate it, science has proven an inadequate replacement for religion, unable to answer humanity's existential concern for meaning, value, and purpose, or to satisfy its deepest longings. The religious impulse, the concern with ultimate questions, continues, though it may avoid traditional religion. It manifests itself in phenomena both reputable and disreputable, such as the New Age movement, cults including satanism, astrology, environmentalism, volunteerism, parapsychology, crop circles, and encounters with UFOs.[7]

The dominance of science and its perceived incompatibility with religion are partly responsible for the lack of intellectual respectability accorded to religious belief (particularly orthodox Christian belief) often to be found among the educated in Britain and other Western countries. J. M. Cameron writes of

> the general assumption made by a majority of the educated, an assumption made by some with pleasure, by others with a kind of melancholy and by still others with no awareness that any assumption is in question, the assumption, namely, that Christianity which is orthodox in the received sense . . . is, unlike atheism, evolutionary vitalism, the lucubrations of the death-of-God theologians and what have you, not a conceivable path through our mysterious human existence. The passion lying behind this exclusion is puzzling in its intensity. . . . [What seems to be involved is] the passionate determination that whatever else may conceivably be a saving truth (this may be anything from Marxism to astrology), whatever else may in part meet the felt mystery of evil, whatever else may offer a prima-facie answer to old conundrums, Christianity may not be considered as even faintly possible. It would be foolish to underestimate how tenaciously and with what rancour this view is held.[8]

With less passion and more wit, American critic R. W. B. Lewis remarks on "an extraordinary contemporary intellectual reluctance to utter the name of God, or even to allude to God in any definite way at all." He goes on to say that God is treated in much "religious" modern writing "as a married man's mistress, someone who must never be mentioned openly, is only thought about with a far corner of the mind, and is met briefly and on occasion in dark and hidden places for illicit reasons."[9] In Iris Murdoch's novel, The Message to

the Planet, the mathematical genius Marcus Vallar suggests "that Gildas, as an intelligent rational man, could not believe in the old personal God or the divinity of Christ," and Gildas, a former Anglican priest, agrees without question.[10]

Among some Western intellectuals, religion is seen as a mark of immaturity on the part of the individual, the culture, or the species, something that they all grow out of. Ludwig Andreas Fuerbach, for example, views religion as a stage in the maturation of the individual, a projection of the self as a method of discovering one's nature.[11] Auguste Comte relegates it to the earliest of his three stages of human thought, while Sigmund Freud, in The Future of an Illusion, compares religion to a "'childhood neurosis,'" adding that "'men cannot remain children for ever.'"[12] Novelist Margaret Drabble describes Alix Bowen, "'a half-baked agnostic with pantheistic yearnings and Christian hangovers,'" sitting in a church during a memorial service, thinking of the Death of God: "When I became a woman, I put away childish things, thinks Alix: things like hymns, prayers, God, hope."[13] Even some theologians, such as William Hamilton, see mankind as coming of age, having outgrown the need for God or a religion.[14]

Religion is considered a phenomenon generated from within, without external reality or validity. It is to Feuerbach an externalisation of the self, a primitive form of self-consciousness.[15] God is a product of the human mind, which, in a reversal of Genesis 1, creates God in its own image. Canadian neuroscientist Michael Persinger sees God as merely "a concept that resides in the brain, a product of evolution and brain function that reduces anxiety about death and self-dissolution."[16]

The indifference, wariness, even hostility of many of the public and the critics towards Christianity create an unfavourable climate for the writing of Christian poetry, and for religious discourse in general, including theology. How does one speak about God to a people who have suffered, in Welsby's words, "the loss of the sense of God"?[17] What language, metaphors, or concepts can one use? It is certain that these are necessary. One may agree that God and an experience of God are ultimately beyond the power of words to describe adequately; that human knowledge of God is always "indirect, symbolic and analogous"[18]; that, in W. H. Auden's words, "silence is the least inadequate metaphor for the Truth."[19] Yet words, metaphors, symbols, and analogies are necessary if one is to communicate and discuss one's knowledge and experience of the divine. The language which traditional Christianity uses is drawn from the culture of the ancient Hebrew and Greek people, and it no longer speaks to many members of industrial urban cultures, women and men whose society, way of life, and understanding of the universe and themselves have changed dramatically, almost

inconceivably, from those of biblical peoples. As physicist Paul Davies writes,

> If the Church is largely ignored today it is not because science has finally won its age-old battle with religion, but because it has so radically reoriented our society that the biblical perspective of the world now seems largely irrelevant. As one television cynic recently remarked, few of our neighbours possess an ox or an ass for us to covet.[20]

In the same category for many people fall such traditional doctrines and images as a fiery hell below, eternal damnation, and the devil; a heaven above with angels; the Atonement, the need to wash one's sins away in the blood of the Lamb, and God as a male and a father.

Clearly, unless Christianity, its theology and poetry are to die away, a thorough renewal of language and imagery is urgently needed. Such renewal and reinterpretation are not as dramatic as they may seem, but have in fact a long history. The central Christian message has been reinterpreted and given different expression for different generations and cultures many times, beginning with Pentecost. Jaroslav Pelikan in Jesus Through the Centuries (1985) deftly traces the history of the images of Christ from the early concepts of Rabbi, Light of the Gentiles, and King of Kings to the more recent Liberator and Man who Belongs to the World--eighteen images in all. His book clearly shows that reinterpretation and the creation of new symbols has been a natural and recurrent activity throughout Christian history. A history of theological interpretations of the Crucifixion would show similar, though less, variety. In his discussion of Romanticism and religion, Stephen Prickett sees a similar process of reinterpretation:

> Coleridge stands in a long line of poets and theologians extending back over three thousand years of history who have enabled the people of God (whether Jewish or Christian) to understand and reformulate their position in times of change and crisis by a radical shift in the prevailing religious metaphors by which they thought and felt.[21]

Bible translators today still struggle to find equivalents for biblical expressions and situations in the lives of the people for whom their work is intended.[22]

Modern theologians and writers have long known of the need for renewal and reinterpretation. Some of the most important names in Protestant theology--Rudolf Bultmann, Emil Brunner, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Paul Tillich--all struggled with the problem of making Christianity intelligi-

ble to modern unbelievers. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944, felt that in the Britain of 1943 "the idea of sin, as distinct from acts of conscious ill-will, is not often present in men's minds; and the whole notion of redemption is so alien from them as to be unintelligible."[23] Russell Barry, Bishop of Southwell, and German theologian Heinz Zahrnt both see the changed reality of the world and the consequent loss of credibility of the traditional Christian language about God as making reinterpretation of the Christian message the most important problem facing the contemporary Church.[24]

English Christian poets find the need for new and renewed language and symbols equally pressing. The widespread loss of belief has had a profound effect on the relationship between the Christian poet and his readership and on the language and symbols through which he seeks to express his insight and experience. He has become more distanced from the potential reader and more isolated, since his beliefs are not shared by the majority of people in his culture, some of whom are in fact hostile. Moreover, as Helen Gardner points out, "The religious poet today cannot rely upon a common fund of religious imagery and religious symbolism, upon liturgical phrases, and great sayings from the Bible." If the poet uses these, he can risk estranging the reader or communicating the wrong thing.[25] Many of the participants at a 1989 Conference on Literature and Religion put on by Academi Gymreig admitted that religious language embarrassed them.[26] Eliot, himself the greatest religious poet of the century, was keenly aware of the loss:

> The trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God and man which our forefathers believed, but the inability to <u>feel</u> towards God and man as they did. A belief in which you no longer believe is something which to some extent you can still understand; but when religious feeling disappears, the words in which men have struggled to express it become meaningless.[27]

The Christian poet must attempt to create the experience of religious belief and the sense of God without many of his traditional resources.

Such is the intellectual and spiritual context in which Thomas writes, with the problems it creates for him as a religious poet. He is certainly aware of his isolation as a religious poet, especially one who is also a priest, and has experienced the hostility of some English critics to Christian poetry. The most blatant example of such hostility is Colin Falck's outburst in a review of <u>Frequencies</u>. Commenting on the "extremity of doubt" and "religious despair" in some of the poems, he goes on:

> A single step further into disbelief and it could all be given back to him again as poetry. The main moral of Frequencies is probably that Christianity has drained the life out of Thomas's (and who can say how many other people's) vision for long enough.[28]

Falck is one of the critics who have never forgiven Thomas for abandoning Wales and Iago Prytherch as poetic subjects in favour of God.

This thesis is concerned to demonstrate that, in such a difficult modern context, Thomas pursues an intense personal search for understanding of the human condition, for knowledge and experience of God, and for the meaning of his vocation, during which he reinterprets, extends, and renews the traditions of Christianity and English Christian poetry. The passion and integrity of his search, his labour to renew old Christian symbols and metaphors and create new ones, the beauty of his spare style at its best, and his intelligent engagement in poetry with serious issues of religion and science make him a key figure in modern British religious poetry.

My concern, as part of my study of Thomas's religious poetry, to place it within religious and literary tradition and to examine his use of old and new symbols, metaphors, techniques, and stories represents a different perspective on Thomas's work. The few critics who have situated him in a tradition of English religious poetry have done so only briefly. Exceptions are Peter Abbs and Colin Meir, who, in separate essays, compare the creation myths of Ted Hughes and Thomas[29]; Warren Wooden, who compares the poetry of Thomas and George Herbert[30]; Tom Stacey, who writes of Andrew Young and R. S. Thomas as "parson poets"[31]; and Max Keith Sutton, who relates Thomas to George Crabbe and William Barnes as pastoral priest-poets, though his emphasis is on the genre of the pastoral.[32] Most often Thomas is placed in the tradition of English rural and nature poetry.

Fewer critics connect Thomas's work to religious tradition, even briefly. Notable exceptions include J. D. Vicary and Vimala Herman, who discuss the tradition of negation,[33] Anthony Conran, who discusses mysticism,[34] William V. Davis, who writes of the apocalyptic mode,[35] and A. M. Allchin, who speaks of the tradition of prayer as waiting.[36]

Specific themes that do appear in the criticism, like myth, the search, the priest, and dichotomies, I examine from different angles, which allows a new understanding of the poems. With the dichotomies in particular, I am concerned to correct an overemphasis by some critics on the dark side of Thomas's experience and a neglect of the affirmative side. Other subjects either do not appear in the criticism, such as Thomas's use of the symbol of the boundary, or are dealt with very inadequately, such as his use of

science. Only half-a dozen critics address the question at all and none in any depth. J. P. Ward's book on Thomas, outside of a short discussion of binary theory in relation to the wound in Christ's side, dispenses with science in one paragraph. Thomas's engagement with science is, I believe, one of his most important contributions to modern Christian poetry.

There is room for a full-length study that focuses on Thomas's poetry of religious search and experience and discusses it in depth, relating it to its traditions. There are only four book-length studies in English devoted to Thomas's work, and none of them does what this study tries to do. Sabine Volk's Approaches to the Poetry of R. S. Thomas, while it contains some insights into the poetry, suffers from an attempt to psychoanalyse Thomas through his work: for example, he is narcissistic, she says, suffers from an acute split between reason and emotion, and is "a self with no centre."[37] This approach is disagreeably presumptuous. Also, Volk seems more interested in Thomas's poetry on Wales and on poetry itself than in his poetry on God.

The other three books are all very thoughtful discussions from which I have learned much, but all are studies of Thomas's entire body of work, arranged chronologically. Moelwyn Merchant's brief book The Poetry of R. S. Thomas (1979)[38] is an introductory survey which, while excellent on Thomas the priest, spends only fifteen pages on the volumes of the 1970's, in which the poet opens up his religious themes. Merchant has not enough space to do justice to them. D. Z. Phillips' R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God (1986)[39] pursues a single theme through the whole work, the theme of the deus absconditus. He is enlightening on this theme (and on Thomas the priest), but other themes, especially counterbalancing ones, are neglected and that sometimes the poems are interpreted to fit the theme. Phillips does not do justice to the dichotomies in Thomas's poetry. J. P. Ward's The Poetry of R. S. Thomas (1987)[40] addresses all of Thomas's work and is concerned to divide it into periods and show changes over time. I do not think the period approach is the most appropriate because Thomas's work does not have such clear-cut divisions, except for the momentous change in emphasis and a lesser change in style that took place around 1970. Ward has much of interest to say about Thomas's religious poetry, especially the matter of language, but his subjects and mine rarely overlap, and when they do, we have different observations to make. Ward is not much concerned with archetypal symbols or tradition, and spends little time on myths and less on science. The subject of this study will add to the picture of Thomas's work expressed in these books and in articles and reviews, and will, I hope, lead to a new appreciation of this important poet.

Thomas is a poet who emphasises the message of a poem, and I have been motivated throughout this study to understand what the poems say and to open them out by exploring how his religious journeying draws on the past, re-presents it for the present, and looks to the future. I have therefore adopted a thematic approach to this study. Thomas's poetry, with its explicit interest in matters of religion and science, falls within two large critical areas, those of Religion and Literature and of Science and Literature. The thematic approach is a recognised approach in both of these areas. Lynn Ross-Bryant, in her 1981 book Imagination and the Life of the Spirit: an Introduction to the Study of Religion and Literature, devotes a chapter to the thematic approach as one of her four approaches to religion and literature, which is usually, though not exclusively, used with "literature that deals with a religious subject."[41] Katherine Hayles, a major figure in the field of the study of literature and science, describes one way to explore the relation between the two as the treatment of science as "a repository of tropes that can be used to illuminate literary texts."[42] This approach is particularly apt, I believe, with a poet like Thomas, who deliberately acquaints himself with scientific theories and states that he finds in them images and metaphors for his poetry.[43]

I have divided my study of Thomas's religious poetry into five significant areas: his understanding of the human condition; his use of myth; his poetry of private belief; his poetry of public belief (poetry arising from his vocation as a priest); and finally, his use of science. I explore the poems that illuminate each area and relate them to religious and literary traditions, paying particular attention to Thomas's use of religious symbols, stories, techniques, doctrines, beliefs, rituals, and practices, as well as traditional literary concerns and types, such as the emblem, metaphor, abstract language, priest-poetry, and prayer-poetry. Although I am especially interested in Thomas's understanding and experience, I have not forgotten that he is a poet, not a systematic thinker and theologian. Besides symbols, metaphors, and biblical, classical, and literary allusions, I have considered such matters as poetic forms, lineation, rhythm, diction, and structure, although my emphases and the number of poems I cite have limited the space I could give to this kind of analysis. I have organised the material thematically, not chronologically, although in fact most of the poems discussed in Chapter One come from the early volumes and most of those discussed in Chapter Six come from the later volumes. There is something to be gained from discussing all the prayer-poems together, all the scientific poems, or all the poems that use the symbol of the boundary. What can be lost is the sense of change and development, but I have tried to pay attention to these in my discussions of the poems.

The first chapter presents Thomas's struggles to articulate his understanding of the human condition, with particular attention to his use of emblematic pictures and archetypal symbols. Such an understanding is intimately tied to Thomas's sense of God and his relationship to God, and thus it is an appropriate subject with which to begin. The second chapter deals with Thomas's use of myth, especially creation myth, to explore concepts of the nature of God and human beings, the relation between God and his creation, and why human life is the way it is. Thomas also uses myth for criticism of modern society and its attitude to technology. In his mythic poems, he reinterprets and extends the traditional biblical stories in fresh, illuminating ways.

Chapters Three and Four describe Thomas's personal search for knowledge and experience of God by examining six significant dichotomies present in the poems: doubt and faith, absence and presence, silence and speech, the apophatic and cataphatic traditions of Western mysticism and theology, the deus absconditus and deus revelatus in Christ, and the personal God and the impersonal God. These are traditional dichotomies, but Thomas explores them in modern, often personal contexts in such a way that the old seems new. These chapters also illustrate the importance in Thomas's thought, experience, and poetry of dialectic and paradox, producing the tension that is, he believes, the source of art.

The fifth chapter places Thomas in the literary tradition of the priest-poet, the man who is, in a sense, a public believer. I examine the relationship between the priest and the poet, emphasising Thomas's views, and then discuss the poetry arising from his religious vocation in terms of four main duties of a priest, as described in the ordination service in the Church of England Book of Common Prayer: ministry of the word, ministry of the sacraments, prayer, and pastoral care. Thomas's priest-poetry displays a tension between priest and poet, priest and people, and priest and himself, as he struggles to understand and live out his vocation among his people and to communicate to them about God. Thomas's candour and his bitter questioning of the priesthood represent something new in the tradition of the English poet-priest.

The final chapter discusses Thomas's use of scientific images, metaphors, and concepts in his descriptions of God and of religious experience. Examination of the relationship of science with literature and with religion has been particularly prominent in recent years. Since 1980, as Stuart Peterfreund points out, the study of science and literature has seen a large increase in interest, indicated by the founding of the Society for Literature and Science in the United States and a large number of publications in the field, including book-length studies, volumes of essays,

special issues of journals, bibliographies, and volumes of papers presented at academic conferences.[44]

During the last two decades, the relationship of science (particularly physics and cosmology) and religion has received increasing public attention through the popular works of scientists like Fritjof Capra (The Tao of Physics [two editions, 1976 and 1985] and, with David Steindl-Rast, Belonging to the Universe: Explorations on the Frontiers of Science and Spirituality [1991]), Rupert Sheldrake (The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God [1991]), and Paul Davies (God and the New Physics [1983] and The Mind of God [1992]). Running concurrently on VISION TV in March, 1993 were three series on the subject: "Whose World?: An Exploration of Science and Belief" (1987), "Soul of the Universe" (1991), and "Befriending the Earth" (1988), presenting the views of "eco-theologians" and Roman Catholic priests Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke. This contemporary interest in the fruitful relation between the hard sciences and both literature and religion or spirituality makes Thomas's poetry exploring these issues of particular interest and importance.

Chapter Six examines how Thomas draws on science for metaphors and images for his religious poetry and how he also addresses the subject of science directly, displaying an ambivalent attitude towards it. I use Capra's outline of the old and new paradigms of science from Belonging to the Universe to suggest an explanation for the differing attitudes. Thomas's intelligent engagement with science makes a fitting subject with which to end this study, in part because he thereby points a fruitful direction for future poets, especially religious poets, to follow.

I refer to a large number of poems in this study. In each chapter, the first time a poem is mentioned, an abbreviation of the volume in which it appears will be given in parentheses following the title of the poem. Subsequent references to the poem in that chapter will not include the volume. Uncollected poems have their sources identified in a note. The list of abbreviations for the titles of volumes precedes this introduction. Definitions from the OED are from the 1971 edition, and those from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon are from the 1972 abridged edition. Quotations from the Bible are from the King James Version.

## Notes

[1] I use "Christian" (interpreted in a liberal sense) and "religious" to describe those of Thomas's poems that deal with knowledge and experience of God, the meaning of the world and of human life, and the exercise of his priesthood. Thomas's explorations of these matters, though often very unorthodox, still take place within a broad Christian framework. "Devotional" I do not use because it implies a less questioning attitude and a greater degree of orthodoxy than most of Thomas's poems show. Thomas is not really a "devout" poet. I acknowledge that to set up a category of "Christian" (or "religious") verse beside other categories of verse is, as Donald Davie writes, to make "a distinction that the truly devout and thinking Christian is obliged to repudiate" (Donald Davie, introduction, New Oxford Book of Christian Verse [London: Oxford UP, 1981] xvii). However, some term is necessary to distinguish these poems from those whose emphasis lies on Welsh history, say, or on the nature of poetry, and I use "Christian" and especially "religious" although "the borderline between sacred and secular cannot in the last analysis be defined" (Davie xviii).

[2] Charles Bent, The Death-of-God Movement (New York: Paulist, 1967) 34.

[3] Alan Sinfield, "Varieties of Religion," Society and Literature 1945-70, ed. Sinfield (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983) 90-92.

[4] P. A. Welsby, A History of the Church of England 1945-1980 (London: Oxford UP, 1984) 44-45.

[5] Welsby 263.

[6] Welsby 289.

[7] As Dostoyevsky's devil tells the newspapermen in The Brothers Karamazov, "'It's reactionary to believe in God in our days, . . . but I am the devil, so I may be believed in'" (F. Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov [New York: Grosset, n.d.] 725). Along similar lines, an American graduate student in Wales told me that he did not believe in God but that he did believe in fairies.

[8] J. M. Cameron, "An Introductory Comment," The Prose for God, ed. Ian Gregor and Walter Stein (London: Sheed, 1973) 6-7.

[9] R. W. B. Lewis, "Hold on Hard to the Huckleberry Bushes," rev. of American Literature and Christian Doctrine, by Randall Stewart, Sewanee Review 67.3 (1959), rpt. in part

in Religion and Modern Literature: Essays in Theory and Criticism, ed. G. B. Tennyson and E. Ericson, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 61.

[10] Iris Murdoch, The Message to the Planet (Toronto: Random, 1989) 15.

[11] John Coulson, "The Adjectives for God: The Persistence of the Religious Imagination in the Nineteenth Century and After," The Prose for God 45.

[12] Christopher Lasch, "The Illusion of Disillusionment," Harper's July, 1991: 19.

[13] Margaret Drabble, The Gates of Ivory (Toronto: McClelland, 1991) 288, 439.

[14] Bent 53.

[15] Coulson 44.

[16] A. J. S. Rayl and K. T. McKinney, "The Mind of God," Omni Aug., 1991: 48.

[17] Welsby 289. That Britons may not have suffered a total loss of the sense of God is suggested by a survey just released, conducted by Andrew Greeley and the National Opinion Research Centre at the University of Chicago. The study found that 70% of Britons (excluding Northern Ireland, where the figure was 94%) believe in God and over half believe in life after death ("Belief in God at All-Time High in Much of the World," Starphoenix [Saskatoon] 22 May 1993: C8). Belief in God does not, however, equal belief in Christianity or any other religion, or participation in its worship. Nor do the figures deny the bias among intellectuals against Christianity, discussed above. The results of the study do suggest that for many people in Britain, God is not in fact irrelevant or dead, though organised religion may be.

[18] Bent 205.

[19] W. H. Auden, "Words and the Word," Secondary Worlds (London: Faber, 1968) 136.

[20] Paul Davies, God and the New Physics (London: Dent, 1983) 2.

[21] Stephen Prickett, Romanticism and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976) 265.

[22] Canadian theologian William Hordern gave an example of the need for symbols appropriate to the audience when, in a sermon given in Saskatoon, 21 June, 1992, he recalled a slum mission run by some students from Union Theological Seminary in New York City during his time there. The students spoke to the children about God as a father and were surprised to find that the children felt if God were a father, then they hated him. As it turned out, their own fathers had either abandoned the family or beaten the children and their mothers in drunken anger. The metaphor clearly did not convey to these children its intended meaning.

[23] William Temple, "Social Witness and Evangelism," Religious Experience and Other Essays and Addresses, ed. A. E. Baker (London: James Clarke, 1958) 198-99.

[24] F. R. Barry, foreword, Christian Faith and Life, by William Temple (London: SCM, 1963) 9-10; Heinz Zahrnt, The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century, trans. R. A. Wilson (New York: Harcourt, 1966) 11-12.

[25] Helen Gardner, The Art of T. S. Eliot (New York: Dutton, 1950) 61.

[26] Gwen Davies, "Academi Gymreig conference," Planet 75 (1989): 119-20.

[27] T. S. Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry," On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber, 1957) 25.

[28] Colin Falck, rev. of Frequencies, by R. S. Thomas, New Review 1 (1978): 122-23.

[29] Peter Abbs, "The Revival of the Mythopoeic Imagination--A Study of R. S. Thomas and Ted Hughes," Poetry Wales 10.4 (1975): 10-27; Colin Meir, "R. S. Thomas," British Poetry Since 1970: A Critical Survey, ed. Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980) 1-13. J. D. Hainsworth had compared the two poets earlier, before Thomas had written his creation myths, in "Extremes in Poetry: R. S. Thomas and Ted Hughes," English 14 (1963): 226-230, as had an unnamed writer in "Poets Today: Ted Hughes and R. S. Thomas," Essays and Reviews from TLS 1964-66 vol. 3 (London: Oxford UP, 1965) 129-33.

[30] Warren Wooden, "A Question of Influence: George Herbert and R. S. Thomas," Little Review 13/14 (1980): 26-29.

[31] Tom Stacey, "Andrew Young, R. S. Thomas, and the Parson Poets," Royal Society of Literature of the United Kingdom: Essays by Divers Hands ns 42 (1981): 91-108.

[32] Max Keith Sutton, "Truth and the Pastor's Vision in George Crabbe, William Barnes, and R. S. Thomas," Survivals of Pastoral, ed. R. E. Hardin (Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 1979) 33-59.

[33] J. D. Vicary, "Via Negativa: Absence and Presence in the Recent Poetry of R. S. Thomas," Critical Quarterly 27.3 (1985): 41-51; Vimala Herman, "Negativity and Language in the Religious Poetry of R. S. Thomas," ELH 45 (1978): 710-31.

[34] Anthony Conran, "R. S. Thomas as a Mystical Poet," Poetry Wales 14.4 (1979): 11-25; rpt. in The Cost of Strangeness (Llandysul: Gomer, 1982) 249-62.

[35] William V. Davis, "R. S. Thomas: Poet-Priest of the Apocalyptic Mode," South Central Review 4.4 (1987): 92-106.

[36] A. M. Allchin, "Emerging: A Look at Some of R. S. Thomas's More Recent Poems," Theology 81 (1978): 352-61.

[37] Sabine Volk, Grenzpfähle der Wirklichkeit: Approaches to the Poetry of R. S. Thomas, diss., Freiburg U, 1983, Neue Studien zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik 31, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1985) 132-39.

[38] Moelwyn Merchant, R. S. Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1979).

[39] D. Z. Phillips, R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God: Meaning and Mediation in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas (London: Macmillan, 1986).

[40] J. P. Ward, The Poetry of R. S. Thomas (Bridgend: Poetry Wales, 1987).

[41] Lynn Ross-Bryant, Imagination and the Life of the Spirit: An Introduction to the Study of Religion and Literature (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981) 49.

[42] N. Katherine Hayles, introduction, Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science, ed. N. K. Hayles (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991) 20.

[43] R. S. Thomas, "Probings: an Interview with R. S. Thomas," by John Barnie and Ned Thomas, Planet 80 (1990): 43.

[44] Stuart Peterfreund, introduction, Literature and Science: Theory and Practice, ed. S. Peterfreund (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1990) 3-4.

# CHAPTER ONE

## The Human Condition

As a restless seeker and a parish priest, Thomas has given much thought to human nature and the human condition. Religious faith is rooted in the experience of human existence, and the human state as Thomas understands it provides a challenge that faith must meet in order to be valid. His understanding has been shaped by Christianity and by Existentialism as reflected in the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, whose works Thomas read and collected as a young man. In his struggle to articulate his understanding of the contradictions of human life, Thomas draws on traditional techniques and archetypal images, which are often modernised in detail or context. Thomas's integrity, courage, and unflinching vision in portraying the human condition as he sees and has experienced it has won his religious poetry a sometimes grudging admiration from the critics.

Thomas views men and women in spiritual and moral terms as fundamentally flawed creatures. This view, though held by many people who are not Christians, is in keeping with the traditional Christian doctrine of original sin, though Thomas does not like the term and rarely uses the word "sin." Instead, he makes use of metaphor. "Pardon" (EA), for example, employs two related metaphors when it speaks of "homo sapiens, that cracked mirror, / Mending himself again and again like a pool." An early poem, "A Thought from Nietzsche" (SF), draws an analogy between the body and a "Lean acre of ground," barren, without bird, leaf, or flower. The poem concludes, "You are betrayed by wilderness within, / That spreads upward and outward like a stain." The warp in human nature is internal, that is, in the essence. "Wilderness," keeping the topographical analogy, implies lack of order and civilisation, a savagery inimical to the human. There is something within human beings that works with increasing strength against their own happiness. "Stain" suggests an ineradicable moral blot.

"Aside" (P) employs a metaphor from medicine, as the speaker tells the Welsh peasant Prytherch:

> Over you the planets stand,
> And have seen more ills than yours.
> This canker was in the bone
> Before man bent to his image
> In the pool's glass. Violence has been
> And will be again.

The canker, "an eating, spreading sore or ulcer; . . . anything that frets, corrodes, corrupts, or consumes slowly and secretly" (OED), lies hidden within the very structure of the body, the bones, and represents a spiritual, moral, and psychological corruption at the heart of humanity. The reference to the human being looking at his reflection in the pool suggests the dawn of self-consciousness (and perhaps also an idolatrous narcissism), that the canker precedes in time, emphasising that humanity has been afflicted with its self-destructive propensities (violence is the example given) since its beginnings. As in Hopkins' "God's Grandeur," "bent" suggests warped morally as well as a physical shape or position, such as that taken in prayer.

The flawed human creature, with its "mind monstrous as you will" ("Alone" [BT]), is not, however, totally depraved. Many poems in Thomas's first important volume, Song at the Year's Turning, explore the nature and life of the solitary Welsh hill farmer or labourer, in often unflattering detail. Beneath the characteristics particular to them, Thomas finds an essential humanness, stressing again and again to his more sophisticated readers that this crude, physically repulsive figure, cruelly "stripped of love / And thought and grace by the land's hardness," is in fact "a man like you" ("Affinity"). He is, to use the technological metaphor from "A Peasant," "your prototype," a primitive version of the more sophisticated modern people represented by the reader--and also the poet. This prototype yet displays or shows potential for the basic qualities of humanity.

The human quality that Thomas emphasises in his relentless examination of the peasant is an essentially spiritual one: the longing for something more than material existence provides. "Affinity" ends: "He also is human, and the same small star, / That lights you homeward, has inflamed his mind / With the old hunger, born of his kind," a hunger that a later poem, "The Dark Well" (T), describes as "the hunger of the uncouth soul / For the light's grace." The star appears frequently throughout Thomas's poetry, usually with symbolic overtones. Stars are particularly numerous in the first six volumes, appearing in thirty poems, where they are associated with aspiration, timeless concerns, and the spiritual realm. Thomas thus draws on the traditional meaning of the star as symbol of the spirit, especially "the forces of the spirit struggling against the forces of darkness,"[1] a darkness that is strong in the peasants' lives. "The light's grace" is the equivalent of the star in "The Dark Well" and it obviously has spiritual associations too. Light is a symbolic attribute of God in many religions and "grace" has a theological meaning that Thomas does not push but that is certainly present, colouring interpretation. Van Harvey defines the term as "the free unmerited act through which God restores his estranged creatures to himself."[2] The soul's hunger, this poem sug-

gests, is the spiritual hunger for communion with God; flawed mankind possesses an inborn religious impulse, whether or not individuals recognise or act on it. A late poem, "Revision" (the first of two with that title in EA), expresses the same thought using the metaphor of a candle: the self is born in darkness, "'a wick hungering / for its attendant flame.'"

For Thomas, human beings exist in a condition characterised mainly by loneliness, despair, and suffering that is physical, mental, and spiritual. Subject to disease, necessity, mutability, and mortality as creatures whose brief lives are bound by time, human beings suffer what novelist Iris Murdoch calls "the black contingent grief which underlies all human existence."[3] Grief is for Thomas the product of intelligence and experience: his infant son's cries are "those of a blind creature / trodden upon; pain not yet become grief" ("The Son" [LS]). Grief is primarily mental, not physical. In "Resolution" (WI), it is "the memories that / one has, the impenitent bungler / of love" that are "the true human pain." Human pain is occasionally shared with nature, as in "Winter" (PS), in which "the voice of the sea wind / Blown through the wood's darkness" is heard "declining / With slow insistence the word 'grief,'" and the poem closes with "nature and man / At one a moment in their pain." More often, nature is indifferent or hostile: "hunger was loneliness, betrayed / By the pitiless candour of the stars' talk" ("Bread" [PS]).

Human beings are the most intelligent of the animals, yet their power of thought often brings them little peace in Thomas's work, but rather a flock of metaphysical questions to plague them, questions that are, if not unanswerable, no sooner answered than they "re-form / as new problems" ("The Answer" [F]). Nor is religion a help for many people. Living in a world in which evil seems so strong--"virtue's / Defeat" is a certainty in "Petition" (H)--men and women sometimes miss the signs of God's presence and believe that God is absent, hidden, or dead, which contributes to their feelings of loneliness and despair. Or else they are simply indifferent; as Thomas comments in "Coming" (EA), "Gods are not put to death // any more. Their lot now / is with the ignored."

Thomas's view of life is neither easy nor comfortable, and yet it is not unremittingly bleak. In "Who?" (P), though the poet feels despair when he considers himself, he takes pleasure in the yearly renewal of nature and the daily cycle: "There is loveliness growing, where might have been truth's / Bitterer berries. The reason tempers / Most of the heart's stormier moods." Other poems assert the presence and importance of love in the human situation: love between man and woman, between human beings, and between God and his creatures. Thomas has written a number of tender poems to

his wife, including the moving "Seventieth Birthday" (BHN), with its striking river metaphor:

> You are drifting away from
> me on the whitening current of your hair.
> I lean far out from the bone's bough,
> knowing the hand I extend
> can save nothing of you but your love.

Poems like "Two" (WI) and "The Hearth" (H) celebrate the resistance of human love to time and mortality. Other poems speak of the love that must govern one's relations with others. In a very late poem, "And this one writes" (ERS), the second last poem in his poetic autobiography and thus a kind of final comment, the speaker offers himself in love to others: "Here is my heart / to be hurt," he says, "Here is my hand / for blaming. I give you / myself." The poem concludes, "Am I not / also in the debt of love?" The poem's allusion to Christ's parable of the debtor in Matt. 18 reveals the Christian sense of being loved and forgiven by God as the motive power of love to others. Though it does not go unchallenged, the theme of God as love runs through the poetry.

Also, God is present in the human situation, sometimes to be apprehended in an ecstatic moment, at other times revealed in ways not obvious. "That" (NBF), to take one example of the latter, cries out against an impersonal God's "blank indifference" to the pain of human life but ends with an ambiguous image: "The shadow of the tree falls / On our acres like a crucifixion." In the branches of the tree, a bird sings, "Hammering its notes home / One by one into our brief flesh." In one sense, this image is a continuation of the grim description of the human condition: our feelings of pain and our mortality crucify us. In another sense, the crucifixion image in the second stanza silently contradicts the anguished declaration of God's indifference in the first stanza, since for Thomas as a Christian, God came in love to share human life in all its pain and mortality, to the point of dying on such a "tree." Thomas does not articulate the point directly but leaves the image to suggest its implication to the reader. Despite these affirming or hopeful suspects of human life, however, it remains true that Thomas sees the human condition existentially as fundamentally a condition of loneliness, despair, and suffering.

Sometimes Thomas is content merely to describe human life in its troubling aspects with bare, abstract terms: "pain, / Evil, deformity" in "After the Lecture" (NBF) or "The death of love, the growth of evil, / The inexorable passing of time" in the enigmatic "Winter Starlings" (T), in which these abstractions are balanced by the dark mass of a flock of starlings, an image that is concrete, animate, and resonantly symbolic. More often Thomas conveys his under-

standing of aspects of human life more indirectly. In the doxological prayer "Because" (P), he describes "what / Life is" through a series of images requiring the reader's interpretation, for example, "The blind hands / Of the aged combing sunlight / For pity" or "the way the world / Digests itself and the thin flame / Scours." The existential loneliness of humanity is beautifully expressed through the narrative form in the simple and moving fable "The Word" (LS), which begins, "A pen appeared, and the god said: / 'Write what it is to be / man.'" The speaker, seemingly without his direct intention, produces "lonely," an answer that is poignantly endorsed by "all those waiting at life's / window." The fable is an ancient form, and the situation in this one suggests a variation of the incident at Belshazzar's feast in Daniel 5, in which a hand mysteriously appears and writes a brief message from God on the wall. But the message in Thomas's poem, an existentialist expression of the essence of being human, is resonantly modern.

Thomas frequently uses the device of the emblematic picture to portray the human condition to great effect.[4] Emblematic or symbolic pictures are a traditional device in Western culture. The prophets of God often received their message from Yahweh in the form of a symbolic picture: for example, the vision of the dry bones related in Ezekiel 38. Visions or dreams could also take this form; one thinks of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great image with the feet of clay and iron in Daniel 2 or Pharoah's dream of the fat kine and the thin kine in Genesis 41.

Allegorical pictures were very popular in the Middle Ages in both secular and religious literature. To take only one example, Langland expresses the spiritual condition of humankind through an allegorical scene at the beginning of Piers Plowman:

> Ac as I biheeld into the eest an hieigh to the sonne,
> I seigh a tour on a toft trieliche ymaked,
> A deep dale bynethe, a dongeon therinne,
> With depe diches and derke and dredfulle of sighte.
> A fair feeld ful of folk fond I ther bitwene--
> Of all manere of men, the meene and the riche,
> Werchynge and wandrynge as the world asketh.[5]

Thomas was familiar with Piers Plowman and may have got the idea of using emblematic pictures to express the state of human life from Langland. The picture in a late poem, "Similarities" (EA), resembles in certain ways the Prologue of Langland's allegory. Thomas's satiric, partly allegorical portrait of modern society features a departing traveller, conjurors, acrobats, beggars, mothers with dead children, the rich endowing a mortuary, a hairy-chested youth wearing

a tin cross (this is what Christianity has come to), a weak pipe and cracked drum (this is what the arts have come to), and a sinister machine that silences people's moral sense. The poem resembles Langland in its crowded scene, its use of satire and allegory, and its tone of moral displeasure.

Emblems, which combined a symbolic picture, a motto, and a poem, all expressing a moral idea, were very popular in Western Europe between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.[6] One of the most famous emblem books, Francis Quarles' Emblems, Divine and Moral, was still in print in the second half of the nineteenth century. The literary tradition of emblematic pictures is much less popular today, at least in its more didactic forms, as the present age dislikes didactic purposes in literature, but it is used with great subtlety and effect in Eliot's The Waste Land and "The Hollow Men."

The emblematic picture presents a scene for contemplation. It is meant to be looked at actively and with attention, not glanced at or instantly apprehended. It always requires interpretation, a task made more difficult if the author uses private symbols, rather than those that are common or archetypal. It presents a surface that is usually generalised, not individual, and one is not invited to linger on the surface but to move past into the depth of meaning lying behind the carefully chosen details. Emblematic pictures have a curiously static quality: even if they include action, the action is somehow frozen or unmoving because it is endlessly repeating. The sense of action often seems to move from the scene to the mind of the reader or viewer, as she or he seeks to interpret the scene. One will notice this static quality in Thomas's emblematic scenes. Finally, emblematic pictures traditionally are used for didactic purposes, as aids for devotion and meditation, and as stimulants to thought, all purposes that one finds operating in Thomas's work.

Thomas's early use of the emblematic picture arises out of his encounters with the hill farmers in his rural Welsh parishes. Over and over in the first seven books, one is presented with a solitary farmer or labourer in a field as a starting point for the poet's thought, and the figure, refined through repetition into its minimal elements, "A man, a field, silence--what is there to say?" ("Autumn on the Land" [SYT]), comes to have a universal significance, as the poet confesses in "Alone" (BT):

> To the watcher at the window
> Life could have had all
> Its meaning crammed into one
> Vertical figure, one shape that stood up
> From the bare landscape and walked on
> With a mind monstrous as you will.

The figure, its position, and its bare surroundings acquire meaning and provoke thought; they come to represent for Thomas the human position. The figure is always alone, always in the middle of the field, "far out from the shore / Of his four hedges" ("The Figure" [BT]), never at the margins, never at the corners, but in a position of greatest isolation with respect to the field. Such a position and the bareness of the landscape, which accentuates his vertical posture, his humanness, emphasise his symbolic function for the poet. Thomas recognises this function when he says in "The Face" (P):

> When I close my eyes, I can see it,
> That bare hill with the man ploughing,
> . . . . . .
> He is never absent, but like a slave
> Answers to the mind's bidding,
> Endlessly ploughing, as though autumn
> Were the one season he knew.

The static quality of the symbolic picture is particularly evident here.

The farmer's position in "The Figure" stresses the essential isolation of the human being in the universe. That he is doing agricultural work, especially ploughing, and never seems to move, since he is still there when the speaker retraces his path later in the day, lends his figure a timeless quality, like Thomas Hardy's patient man harrowing clods in "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations.'" Thomas's use of "peasant," surely an anachronism in mid-twentieth-century Wales, serves a similar purpose. Moreover, the plowman as a symbolic and didactic figure forms another link with Langland, although Piers the Plowman is a more complex symbol. The speaker in these emblematic poems rarely engages the farmer but mostly observes him, which distances the latter and emphasises his function as symbol and stimulus for thought, meditation, and poetry. As the poet tells Iago Prytherch in the poem of that name,

> I passed and saw you
> Labouring there, your dark figure
> Marring the simple geometry
> Of the square fields with its gaunt question.
> My poems were made in its long shadow
> Falling coldly across the page.

Thomas is referring to his struggles to understand and accept the character of his parishioners, to the conflict between the Wordsworthian ideal of the rustic and the crude reality, and, even more important, to the insight into human nature and life that the picture of the solitary farmer in his field symbolises for the poet. The "gaunt question" is

unspecified, but the poems suggest it has to do first with the character and harsh life of the hill people, particularly as they depart from the poet's Romantic expectations, and second with the existential situation of human life as symbolised by the solitary farmer in his field.

Thomas's farmer in his field is unusual among his emblematic pictures in that it is completely natural and realistic, a scene he must have observed frequently in his daily life. Though its significance is deepened and universalised, the figure clearly retains its roots in ordinary life, and the vision of the poem shifts between the two planes, ideally holding them in tension. The scene is, in a sense, found or revealed, rather than deliberately constructed by the poet.

Something similar occurs in Thomas's sacramental use of the tree in a poem like the sonnet, "Hill Christmas" (LS), in which, leaving the Christmas Eucharist service, the communicants'

> horizon contracted
> to the one small, stone-riddled field
> with its tree, where the weather was nailing
> the appalled body that had asked to be born.

In this brief emblematic scene at the end of the poem, the tree never ceases to be a real tree in a real field, but at the same time it is also, to the eye of faith, the Cross with its suffering God, present in the midst of the small, stony, weather-beaten field that is human life. In both of these scenes, the symbol-seeking eye of the poet is able to perceive depth of meaning beneath the surface of his environment.

Part way between the peasant-in-the-field poems, with the naturalism of their scenes, and poems like "Amen" and "The Coming," with the more obvious element of composition in their scenes, lies "Look" (NBF), in which aspects of the world of Iago Prytherch are exaggerated to enforce a point. Attacking Romantic and Classical attitudes to nature as unrealistic, the poet presents a scene symbolising in extreme form what he sees as the true condition of nature and of rural life, and by extension, of human life in general. The two anonymous "cronies," who represent at once crude humanity and "voices of the earth," live a life of misery and pain in a landscape symbolising physical discomfort, decay, and disease. The wind and rain assault them and "seas of manure" lie underfoot. They deal in "mildew and pus and decay" and "feed on mucous / And wind." They "fester" like an ulcer and their noses run. Faced with such a bleak life, these unheroic characters ("cronies" and the "assignations" towards which they move have unsavoury associations) complain and despair, according to the poet, who interprets their words to the reader:

They are saying,
Each in his own way, "I am dying
And want to live. I am alive
And wish to die."

The source of their despair is theological: they cannot believe in a God who created the world for such suffering. Relating God and religious belief to the pain and crudity of physical life is a challenge that Thomas repeats at the close of the poem:

We must dip belief
Not in dew nor in the cool fountain
Of beech buds, but in seas
Of manure through which they squelch
To the bleakness of their assignations.

The classical allusion to the story of Achilles, whose mother dipped him in the Styx to protect him from death, suggests that belief will be the stronger for its pungent baptism.

Often one can sense a resemblance between Thomas's work and another art form. In its grim effect and its shadowy anonymous figures, moving in a bleak symbolic landscape, one can imagine "Look" as the opening scene in some gloomy, poetic, black-and-white film by Ingmar Bergman. "Amen" (P), in contrast, resembles one of the modern paintings upon which Thomas wrote companion poems in Ingrowing Thoughts (1985), one by Georgio di Chirico perhaps or Max Ernst. The symbolic scene in this poem is a careful composition of a few simple, isolated details, intended to represent human life: a kneeling man with head bowed, animals yawning with boredom, birds high in the sky, green capitals (probably trees). The man's posture suggests resignation and hopelessness, as well as prayer. That his heart was "broken / Far back," gives an emotional tone and sense of timelessness to the picture, as well as implying a broken relationship with nature and with God. Roland Mathias believes, however, that it is God's heart that was broken far back, that is, at the human fall into sin.[7]

The indifferent animals and "the cold landscape" that "returned my stare" indicate that nature is alien and aggressively uncaring, isolating the human figure even further. There is a static quality to the scene: even the flying birds are "notched on the sky's // Surface," their movement frozen. In the background, one hears two isolated, conflicting sounds: larksong and, beneath it, the ominous noise of unseen, rusty wheels. Also unseen, beneath the green capitals, lie "the molecules and the blood's virus"; the former represent the constituent parts of human beings and all matter, and the latter represents both disease,

which strikes at life, and the inherent human bent towards evil.

This emblematic picture is produced by the poet in response to the speaker's implicit outcry, occurring before the poem begins, the substance of which can be inferred from line 13, "There was no answer." Presumably the speaker has cried out that there must be an answer to the problem of suffering, to the question of human life. The tableau signifies instead what God implies when he answers in line 1: "How do you know?": that "There was no answer. Accept; accept." This message is reinforced by the title, "Amen," which gives assent, "So be it." The problem of suffering is one of Thomas's main religious themes, expressed especially in emblematic pictures. In this poem, he learns, like Job, that some questions have no answers.

The finest of the poems expressing the human condition through emblematic pictures is "The Coming" (H). This poem employs lean description, a sober tone, understated emotion, subtle allusions, and evocative, integrated symbolic details to dramatise the impulse behind the Incarnation of Christ. The situation of the poem reminds one of Milton, especially of Books III and X of Paradise Lost. Like Milton, Thomas transports his reader to the abode of God to see and hear an imagined interaction between the first and second persons of the Trinity concerning action to be taken about the condition of mankind. Unlike Milton, however, Thomas is not interested in the habitation of the Lord, the picture of divine glory and majesty, or the relationship between God and the Son. Dialogue is minimal, and God makes no comment on the land or why it is the way it is, nor does the son explain why he wants to go or what he will do there, though the poem implies its answers. Instead, the focus of the poem accords with that of God and the son: the sick land. In "The Coming," Thomas is primarily interested in the human condition that calls forth the son's response and in that response itself.

As the poem begins, God invites or commands the son to look into "a small globe," which he holds in his hand. The word "globe" suggests the earth and the image of the opening sentence recalls the traditional Christian idea of God's protective hands upholding the world, expressed in the spiritual "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." The poem opens then with an image of God's care and love for the earth. The globe also suggests a lens, which sharpens sight and alters scale, and a glass ball used for seeing over time and space, an impression reinforced by the son's perception of the land "Far off, / As through water." The mediating device of the globe adds an element of mystery, frames and distances the scene on earth, and accords with its emblematic nature.

The "scorched land" God shows to the son is, like Eliot's Waste Land and Thomas's own hill country, symbolic

of its people's spiritual condition. The intense heat has burnt the land, rendering it infertile and bare. The tree has no leaves, the hill no grass. The river is sick: "radiant," which suggests a healthy glow, is immediately undercut by "slime," which suggests corruption, pollution, and death. "Radiant" may also imply that the slime is radioactive, productive of slow, agonising death. "Crusted buildings" imply decay and filth. The intense light and heat, expressed in "scorched," "fierce colour," "burned," "bright," and "radiant," render these details more vivid and unbearable.

The suffering inhabitants of this sick land, their arms "thin" from starvation or illness or both, pin their hopes on a bare tree on a bare hill, a tree with "crossed boughs" that "saddened the sky." The pun on "crossed," the sadness, and the reference to April reinforce the identification of the tree as the Cross. The cure for the people's spiritual illness and sterility lies there, though it is unclear if they understand the implications of the tree, or whether they have ever experienced the "vanished April," a month Thomas, following tradition, associates with spring and with the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ.

The son's response to the people and their land is quiet, unconditional, and unhesitating: "Let me go there, he said." The juxtaposition of scene and response implies compassion for the people's suffering as the motive for his action. Thomas hints obliquely at the story of Eden with his metaphor of "a bright serpent" for the river and with the suggestion that things had once been better, but he does not present an atonement theory of the Crucifixion, as Milton does. He does not explain how such a sorry state came about, nor does he use the word "sin." Rather, through the poignant symbolic scene and the son's response, he suggests the son's desire to share the human condition, to respond with compassion to human need, despite the personal cost implied in "crossed / Bough." Exposition of theological doctrine, never appealing to Thomas, is replaced by presentation of an imaginative emblematic scene for contemplation.

Another important traditional device with which Thomas expresses his vision of human life is the archetype of the journey, sometimes used in conjunction with the related symbols of the abyss, the bridge, and the boundary. Although they appear throughout Thomas's work, the symbols of journey, abyss, and boundary in relation to the human condition are particularly prominent in the later work, published after 1970, when he concentrated on the religious themes of the search for understanding and for God. The journey appears twice as often in the later work as in the earlier volumes, the abyss five times as often, and the boundary and its synonyms nearly nine times as often. Clearly, these symbols become increasingly significant in Thomas's consideration of human life.

The journey is a symbol of intellectual and spiritual search: as Cirlot writes, "Primarily to travel is to seek."[8] As a symbol applying to part or all of life, the journey has deep roots in human experience. Many ancient peoples saw their lives after death as beginning with a journey to the land of the dead or to the gods. Often they buried articles for the trip in the grave with their dead; the Greeks, for example, were buried with an obol to pay Charon, the ferryman, for their passage over the river Styx to the underworld. The Egyptians built pyramids to assist their ruler on his journey to the sun. Christ in his Sermon on the Mount used the journey as a symbol for the spiritual life of the person before death: "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matt. 7: 13-4). Dante and Bunyan followed this lead in portraying the spiritual life as an arduous journey over often difficult roads towards the courts of God.

For the author of the fifteenth-century morality play Everyman, the journey is used to symbolise preparation for death. Also called a "pilgrimage" and a "voyage," the journey begins when Everyman is summoned by Death, God's messenger, to present his accounts before his maker and ends when he topples lifeless into his grave. In "Crossing the Bar," Tennyson uses a sea voyage undertaken at dusk to symbolise the process of dying; death occurs when the soul's ship crosses the bar and the sailor meets Christ his Pilot "face to face." Life as a sea voyage with the human being as a ship and heaven the port was in Renaissance and Elizabethan times a popular allegory, often worked out in considerable detail.[9] In Sir Thomas Wyatt's sonnet, "My Galley Chargèd with Forgetfulness," the ship, seas, rocks, time of day and year, steersman, oars, wind, rain, cloud, rigging, stars, and port are all given a meaning in the moral allegory of the poem, while several of Quarles' emblems in Emblems, Divine and Moral depict a similar nautical scene for the reader's edification. In part V of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," the journey begins before birth as the soul travels over the sea to the shore of this life, then continues inland, away from the east, the sea, and its origins. D. H. Lawrence's "The Ship of Death" continues the use of the sea journey to represent death.

Thomas employs this archetypal symbol to describe the inner life of mankind, often in a modern context that renews the traditional symbol. "Somewhere" (LS), for example, opens with a witty description of the modern pilgrim as a spiritual tourist, more interested in what he can take home in the way of souvenirs and photographs than in experiencing his destination. Restlessness, expressed in constant mental and physical travel, characterises modern life in the West:

> What are our lives but harbours
> we are continually setting out
> from, airports at which we touch
> down and remain in too briefly
> to recognize what it is they remind
> us of? And always in one
> another we seek the proof
> of experiences it would be worth dying for.

The search for values to give depth and meaning to life is ultimately the search for God, for "the one light that can cast such shadows."

"Travellers" (WI) uses an allegorical journey to emphasise that the old answers to human problems no longer suffice. Across "the continent / of the mind" there once moved an anonymous traveller in search of truth. At a certain point, he believes that he has found the answer and cries, "I have won / my salvation!" The poem implies that the truth and salvation are those of traditional Christianity. But the traveller's discovery represents only "the statement / of his condition," not a timeless answer to all problems. The "continent," the intellectual world of modern people, has grown, and the words of "the lost traveller" are "discredited" in their eyes.

The archetypal journey always has a destination, a port: in traditional Christianity this is heaven, the City of God, the New Jerusalem. Thomas expresses the modern seekers' loss of certainty and direction by their "appalling" discovery in "Travellers" that the contemporary journey has no end. The poem argues that the language and concepts of traditional Christianity do not address the modern situation, and so the poem aligns Thomas with contemporary Protestant theology on this issue. It does so through a radical reinterpretation of the traditional symbol, which becomes representative of the modern spiritual condition.

As in these two poems, Thomas's search for God or truth or meaning is often portrayed metaphorically as a journey directed outward, following a path that can be spiral ("Cones" [EA]) or twisting ("The Journey" [PS]), a mountain ascent ("Perhaps" [F]) or even a way forward that is paradoxically over one's shoulder ("Adagio" [LP]). In four later poems, however, the journey is directed inward and downward for a spiritual truth that resides within. "Groping" (F) provides the best example. The poem begins by repudiating movement outward in favour of the interior descent:

> Moving away is only to the boundaries
> of the self. Better to stay here,
> I said, leaving the horizons
> clear. The best journey to make
> is inward. It is the interior
> that calls.

The inward journey is first pictured as a mountain descent ("Wordsworth let himself down the precipice / of his own mind"), then as a dark journey underground. The journey is associated with other people, first Wordsworth and T. S. Eliot, then the people whose hands he takes and whose voices he hears on his own journey, and finally "the pioneers who died for truth," whose bones give off "a strange light" along the way. The journey is thus down into a self that belongs both to the individual and to the human race; journey and self are both personal and communal. Emphasised by its position as the last word of the poem is the goal of the journey: "truth."

In several poems, Thomas combines the journey with the abyss and the bridge to create a symbol of the contemporary human condition. The abyss, defined by the OED as "the great deep, the primal chaos" and "a bottomless gulf," is an ancient concept. It is present in the Bible and also in Paradise Lost, where Satan has to brave "The dark unbottomed infinite Abyss,"[10] ruled over by Chaos and Night, in order to cross from Hell to Earth in Book II. The abyss is an important part of Kierkegaard's description of human life. In The Concept of Dread, the angst or dread experienced by humanity is likened to dizziness felt by one "whose eye chances to look down into the yawning abyss."[11] Geddes MacGregor defines Kierkegaard's term "angst" as "an agonizing premonition prompted by a sense of dread at being on the edge of an abyss of nothingness."[12]

The word recurs in the writing of such influential twentieth-century theologians as Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. The latter, probably influenced by Kierkegaard, describes the existential perception of the thoughtful person today as one of fear, danger, and uncertainty: "'he has experienced the nothingness which rages around all being like a threatening ocean.'" Further, "'if it occurs to him to ask what the meaning of his being is, then an abyss opens to him into which only the most courageous dares to gaze: the abyss of meaninglessness.'"[13] The American theologian and literary critic Nathan Scott, Jr. writes that a great "fascination with the Abyss" is perhaps the most important characteristic of modern times.[14]

Thomas's use of the abyss often shows the influence of Milton, Kierkegaard, and perhaps Tillich. Solitary human figures are poised over the threatening abyss or at its edge in poems like "Encounter" (BT), "Threshold" (BHN), and "Phew!" (WI). In "An obsession with nothing" (ERS), the poet "looked over / the world's edge and nausea / engulfed him," a clear allusion to the passage from The Concept of Dread quoted above. "Strands" (EA) concludes with an image of the contemporary human condition that combines the abyss, the sea voyage, and the journey with no end:

> Is there a far side
> to an abyss, and can our wings
> take us there? Or is man's
> meaning in the keeping of himself
> afloat over seventy thousand
> fathoms, tacking against winds
> coming from no direction,
> going in no direction?

"Seventy thousand / fathoms," which appears in three poems and is implied in several others, is an allusion to a famous passage from Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript:

> Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.[15]

The image of a faith intimately related to uncertainty and poised always over the threatening abyss is deeply resonant for Thomas. The poem suggests that the meaning of life may be in the journey itself, in the mere fact of human survival in a chaotic, threatening universe that in its details resembles Milton's abyss.

Variations of the bridge appear in the next group of half-a-dozen poems, which represent the human journey either as the perilous negotiation of a "shining tight rope / between dark and dark" ("Citizen" [LP]), or, in an image drawn from the passage from Concluding Unscientific Postscript and clearly influenced by science, as the dangerous traversal of "a plank / . . .over seventy thousand fathoms." Below are the dead who failed and fell, "above and / beyond . . . [are] the galaxies' / violence, the meaningless wastage / of force, . . . chaos" ("Balance," F). The absence of handrails corresponds with the speaker's abandonment of his "theories, the easier certainties / of belief" in his risky journey of life and faith. The absence of a clear end for either tightrope or plank expresses in different form the idea of a journey with no end, a journey that thus gathers meaning into itself. The symbol expresses the dominant metaphysical view of the twentieth century, which locates meaning and value within this earthly sphere rather than looking to a world beyond or a life after.

The final archetype, the boundary, occurs in four dozen poems describing the human existential condition, usually in conjunction with the journey. Variations of "boundary" that appear in these poems include "horizon," "perimeter," "limit," "periphery," "march," "border," "frontier," and "threshold." Thomas employs the symbol of the boundary to describe two main concepts: an uncrossable limit such as the horizon and a potentially crossable limit such as a border. The first concept, the horizon, represents the limit of horizontal, unaided vision, thus dividing the known from the unknown. Since it is an inherently uncrossable boundary that cannot even be reached, it also represents an absolute limit and divides the knowable from the unknowable. "Horizon" is used in this sense in science, as in an "event horizon," the "edge" of a black hole, beyond which no information can escape to the outside world. To pursue anything that lies over the horizon is thus doomed to frustration and failure.

The horizon as the limit of one's personal vision, concern, or mental life appears in poems like "Hill Christmas," in which the peasants' "horizon contracted / to the one small, stone-riddled field," and "The New Mariner" (BHN), in which the elderly speaker sees old age as "a time to draw / my horizons about me," to diminish the field of his attention. An early poem, "Soil" (AL), sees the hedge around the peasant's field, rather than the actual horizon, as defining the limits of his world and his mind, a choice that emphasises the narrowness of the peasant's life. On the horizon, on the perimeter of life, lurks danger: the shark's fin in "Seaside" (OY), "the divine / snarl" in "Calling" (EA). In other poems, on the horizon or especially beyond the horizon reside desirable objects of pursuit: truth ("Correspondence" [BHN]) or purpose ("Selah" [LS]). One has seen how the relentless journey in search of such goals preoccupies the poet.

In the poetry of Frequencies (1978) and later, Thomas comes to feel that the journey outward ultimately brings no satisfaction, and he uses the archetype of the boundary, especially the horizon that cannot be crossed, to express that realisation. The opening of "Groping" declares that one cannot get outside one's own self, one's limits and subjectivity: "Moving away is only to the boundaries of the self." The speaker opts to remain where he is, "leaving the horizons / clear," and then to travel "inward," into the self, in search of "truth." "Destinations" (LP), which concludes with the speaker's realisation that the human journey "towards the light" must be a journey inward, speaks of "the brightness over / an interior horizon" as the goal. In "Correspondence," a pessimistic poem about a futile search for God and meaning, Thomas writes:

> Younger I deemed truth
> was to come at beyond the horizon.

> Older I stay still and am
> as far off as before.

Whether one travels or not, one cannot arrive at truth.

Such a pessimism is temporary. Several poems in Experimenting with an Amen explore the spiritual value of stillness as an alternative to the journey, especially when the latter proceeds in the wrong direction. In "Apostrophe," the unidentified speaker declares "There are no journeys." The wise are those who remain still, to assess their nearness to love. "This One," though it suggests that there are "journeys / without destinations," praises the one who stands apart from the speeding traffic to "confer / with the eternal":

> From receding
> horizons he has withdrawn
> his mind for greater repose
> on an inner perspective,
> where love is the bridge between
> thought and time.

Truth, the kingdom of God, lies within and blessed is he who remains still to find it.

The second concept symbolised by "boundary" is that of a border, a place where two spaces, states, or conditions meet. Unlike the horizon, which is always distant and unattainable, it is possible not only to reach a border but to remain there and even, in some cases, to cross it. A border, frontier, or threshold is a place of tension, challenge, uncertainty, and possibility. Several modern thinkers have used this sense of the boundary to describe the human situation in whole or in part. Existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers and theologian Paul Tillich both speak of the "boundary situation," which Nathan Scott succinctly defines as a situation "in which man is nakedly exposed to the primal terrors and threats to which his limited and imperfect creatureliness is subject." He experiences "the quandaries and ambiguities of life."[16] Tillich speaks of "the point at which not-being in the ultimate sense threatens us" as "the boundary line of all human possibility, the human border-situation."[17] The boundary situation is thus connected with the abyss, and those Thomas poems that show humankind on the edge of the abyss describe this situation. According to Hans Zahrnt, Tillich considered the boundary the best position to occupy if one wished to acquire knowledge.[18] Theologian Karl Barth writes that "'The believer's place is on the threshold, hoping and waiting,'"[19] while Scott sees the situation of all humanity as "liminal," a word derived from the Latin for "threshold."[20]

Thomas frequently describes humanity on the boundary. Several poems present a boundary as a human limit. In "The

Combat" (LS), God engages humanity "on the innocent marches / of vocabulary," later described as "the frontier of the great poem." In "The Gap" (H), the boundary is the gap of the title, the narrow "chasm" that separates God from "the tower of speech" human beings have built. In both poems, God acts to preserve the boundary between himself and his creatures by enforcing the limits of human language. God occupies the territory beyond human limits. In "Gradual" (LP), it is the human understanding that has limits. The speaker has arrived at "the borders / of the understanding" and prays for guidance, "whether to press / onward or to draw back."

Other poems describe a human being on a threshold, a place that, according to Mircea Eliade, is of great ritual and religious importance because it is both a border between two worlds and an opening in that border.[21] It is on the threshold of their houses, the lintel and side posts, that the Israelites are to sprinkle the blood that will save their lives on Passover night in Exodus 12. "The Porch" (F) describes a man's sudden confrontation with "a universe / that was without knowledge of him," and the experience freezes him in place "on that lean / threshold, neither outside nor in," between the church at his back and the universe in front. The experience can be seen as a boundary situation in Tillich's sense since the man feels threatened by nothingness and not-being in the form of the alien universe that knows nothing of him.

"Threshold" (BHN) combines the symbol of the spiritual and intellectual life as a journey with those of the threshold and abyss in a poem that presents its speaker at a point of spiritual decision. The poem opens,

> I emerge from the mind's
> cave into the worse darkness
> outside, where things pass and
> the Lord is in none of them.

The cave alludes both to Plato's Parable of the Cave in Book VII of The Republic, the world of appearances that one leaves for the bright world of Ideas, and to Elijah's cave in 1 Kings 19, from which he perceives the Lord, not in a strong wind, an earthquake, or a fire, but in "a still small voice." For the speaker, the world outside the cave is not filled with the light of truth, nor is the voice of God heard there. Rather, the world outside "the mind's cave," which is either the sensory world on which the mind reflects or perhaps what lies beyond the limits of the mind, is darker than the cave itself. The old stories fail to reflect the speaker's experience. He admits that he has "lingered too long on // this threshold," but feels uncertain of his direction:

> To look back is to lose the soul
> I was leading upward towards
> the light. To look forward? Ah,
>
> what balance is needed at
> the edges of such an abyss.

The speaker ultimately embraces the forward vision, life lived at the edge of the abyss, with the tentative hope that God will touch his outstretched hand.

Thomas's view of human life clearly owes much to existentialism with its emphasis on the alienated, limited human being, deprived of security and prey to anxiety, the fear of death, and despair. Such a view is not incompatible with faith in God, as Kierkegaard's work shows. Feelings of despair and alienation from God can be found also in such Old Testament books as Job and the Psalms. As Christopher Lasch writes,

> the deepest variety of religious faith always, in every age, arises out of a background of despair. Religious faith asserts the goodness of being in the face of suffering and evil. Black despair and alienation--which have their origin not in perceptions exclusively modern but in the bitterness always felt toward a God who allows evil and suffering to flourish--often become the prelude to conversion,

as does "an awareness of 'radical evil.'" Lasch concludes, "Alienation is the normal condition of human existence."[22] Thomas mitigates the existential picture by allowing God into it, sometimes as a longed-for possibility eagerly pursued, sometimes as a presence within the human landscape. The nature of this God, his relationship to humankind and especially to the poet, and the weathers of the poet's spiritual life form the subject for the next three chapters.

In exploring his view of human nature and human life, Thomas employs many traditional techniques, forms, and symbols. Their use roots the poems in Christian tradition and in English literary tradition and emphasises the element of continuity. When Thomas uses these techniques to treat modern subjects, the unexpected mixture of the familiar and the new creates in the reader surprise and attention, leading to new understanding. For example, the emblematic scene in "Amen" presents for the reader's contemplation a modern view of mankind, isolated in a world of alienated nature, rusty wheels, molecules, and viruses. The familiar elements of man and nature are seen in a new way, especially when combined with the new elements of modern technology and the microscopic world. One is provoked into thought. Thomas's

use of traditional devices renews and reinterprets them in a modern context.

Thomas's view of human life as characterised by suffering, loneliness, and despair also gives him a kind of permission in this unreligious age to go on to talk about God. Several of his critics imply in their remarks that his religious poetry is acceptable to them only because he faces human pain, because his is not an easy faith. M. A. Tatham comments: "Thomas's pessimism in treating the dichotomy between faith and doubt lets us share a measure of his experience as a Christian even when we cannot follow him unreservedly."[23] One is reminded of Helen Gardner's description of an unpropitious age for religious poetry: it is one

> in which a poem is expected to make its own field of reference, in which the poet has to convince us of the importance of what he has to say, and must prove his credentials not merely as a poet but as a religious man, and must also prove, in some measure, the credentials of religion.[24]

Such validation occurs when Thomas finds God and faith possible within a ruthlessly honest and complex understanding of the human condition.

## Notes

[1] J. E. Cirlot, "Star," A Dictionary of Symbols, 1962 ed.

[2] Van A. Harvey, "Grace," Handbook of Theological Terms (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

[3] Iris Murdoch, The Message to the Planet (Toronto: Random, 1989) 431.

[4] James Knapp was the first critic to comment on the emblematic nature of Thomas's Welsh poems in an article (based on his doctoral thesis), "The Poetry of R. S. Thomas," Twentieth Century Literature 17 (1971): 1-9. Knapp briefly mentions the farmers and their land as symbolic of "a particular vision of the human condition," the farmer as "a kind of minimal man," and "The Peasant" as "almost . . . a tableau or an emblem," but the reference to emblems occurs only once, at the end of a sentence. Knapp does not develop the idea of emblematic scenes. The last half of Belinda Humfrey's article, "The Gap in the Hedge: R. S. Thomas's Emblem Poetry" (Anglo-Welsh Review 26 [1977]: 49-56), speaks briefly of the emblematic or "diagrammatic" method of the peasant poems and sees the gap and absence in Thomas's work as ironic emblems of God's absence.

[5] William Langland, Prologue, The Vision of Piers Plowman, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London: Dent, 1978) 1, ll. 13-19.

[6] C. Hugh Holman, "Emblem Books," A Handbook to Literature, 3rd ed., 1972.

[7] Roland Mathias, rev. of Pietà, Anglo-Welsh Review 16 (1967): 158.

[8] Cirlot, "Journey."

[9] As Michael F. N. Dixon writes in a note on Wyatt's "My Galley Chargèd with Forgetfulness," "The extended metaphor of the individual as a ship navigating the seas of life, needing reason at the helm for safe passage, was derived by Wyatt from Petrarch and became a commonplace in Renaissance literature" (Introduction to Poetry: British, American, Canadian, ed. Jack David et al. (Toronto: Holt, 1981) 93.

[10] John Milton, Paradise Lost, Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Bobb-Merrill, 1957) II.404. All references to Milton's poems are from this edition.

[11] Søren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Dread, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 54.

[12] Geddes MacGregor, "Angst," Everyman Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy, 1990 ed.

[13] Heinz Zahrnt, The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century, trans. R. A. Wilson (New York: Harcourt, 1966) 297.

[14] Nathan A. Scott, Jr., The Broken Circle: Studies in the Theological Horizon of Modern Literature (New Haven: Yale UP, 1966) 79.

[15] Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans. D. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton UP for American Scandinavian Foundation, 1944) 182.

[16] Nathan A. Scott, Jr., foreward, The Tragic Vision and the Christian Faith (New York: Association, 1957) x.

[17] Paul Tillich, The Protestant Era, abridged ed., trans. J. L. Adams (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1957) 198.

[18] Zahrnt 303.

[19] Karl Barth, quoted in Zahrnt 32.

[20] Nathan A. Scott, Jr., The Poetics of Belief (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985) 6-7.

[21] Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1959) 25.

[22] Christopher Lasch, "The Illusion of Disillusionment," Harper's July 1991: 21.

[23] M. A. Tatham, "The Long Dialectic of Rain and Sunlight," New Blackfriars 58 (1977): 281-82.

[24] Helen Gardner, "Religious Poetry," Religion and Literature (London: Faber, 1971) 137.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Myth, the Machine, and the Nature of God

Always aware of the uncertainty, pain, and loneliness of human existence, Thomas conducts his search for God, a search that, in its varying moods, dominates his religious poetry. One aim of this quest is to know the true nature of God, to know God's name. As Thomas says in his speech "Abercuawg," "man's constant aspiration" is to answer Jacob's question to the being he wrestled with: "What is thy name?"[1] Thomas pursues this aspiration most diligently in the poetry written after his move to Aberdaron in 1967. Since then, he tells Timothy Wilson, he has been "wrestling with these intellectual problems--what do we mean by life, by God, how to see man as a loving free creature? These are the things I think worth writing about now."[2] In a 1983 interview, answering a question about his poetry providing solutions to spiritual problems, Thomas says: "In pointing in the poem to what you think is the true nature of God in the world you can, possibly, make some sort of contribution to somebody who's in doubt, somebody who's questioning 'how can there be a God?'"[3] The poet, then, sees expression of the divine nature as one of his poetic themes.

The most striking poems in which Thomas explores the nature of God--or, more precisely, various conceptions of the nature of God--are the mythic poems that appear in H'm, Laboratories of the Spirit, and Frequencies. Thomas's decision to write mythic poetry is significant in two ways. First it places him in a long English literary tradition. Myth has nourished English poetry from its beginnings: the oldest surviving poem in the English language, Caedmon's "Hymn" from the seventh century, treats the most important of mythological subjects, the creation of the world. Since then, English poets have drawn from or written versions of various kinds of myth: Classical, Christian, Germanic, Irish, Arthurian, fertility, and even private myth, peculiar to a single poet. Mythic influence remains strong in modern British poetry, in the works of T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Robert Graves, D.H. Lawrence, David Jones, Ted Hughes, Edwin Muir, and others. When Thomas chooses to write mythic poetry, he is aligning himself with a very old and still current literary tradition.

More important, Thomas is also choosing to participate in an important social function of the traditional poet, including the Welsh bard, which is to reinterpret the old myths and create new ones for his or her generation. Such a

task is even more important in the modern Western world. Writers and thinkers as diverse as Friedrich Nietzsche, August von Schelling, Friedrich Schlegel, T. S. Eliot, Carl Jung, and Rollo May agree that western civilisation has lost its underlying myths, those stories held in common, which, in May's words, provide personal identity and a sense of community, undergird moral values, and deal with "the inscrutable mystery of creation."[4] The loss of myth affects the poet doubly, as Philip Wheelwright writes, for "the spiritual problems of the poet in contemporary society arise in part out of the lack of myths which can be felt warmly, envisaged in concrete and contemporary imagery, and shared with a wide body of responsive readers."[5] Theologians agree that many elements of the old Christian myth no longer speak to people and urge its reinterpretation for the twentieth century. The task for the poet is to create new myths out of which to write. For the traditional poet, especially the religious poet like Thomas, who does not reject the old myths wholesale as dead, this means also revitalising and reinterpreting them. Renewal of myth is largely what Thomas does in his mythic poems.

Of Thomas's directly mythic poems, that is, poems that are myths rather than simply allude to an embracing background myth, about two dozen are creation myths in the broad sense, myths describing not just the beginning of the cosmos and its creatures <u>in illud tempore</u>, as does Genesis 1, but also "all the primordial events in consequence of which man became what he is today--mortal, sexed, organised in a society, obliged to work in order to live, and working in accordance with certain rules."[6] Other poems expand the vision of the creation myths into a mythic analysis of modern society. Thomas employs his creation myths to explore various concepts of God, the nature of human beings, and the relation between God and his creation, both human and non-human. In his treatment of his material, Thomas is both profoundly traditional and profoundly radical. Biblical myth, particularly the J strand of Genesis, provides the starting point for Thomas's mythopoeic imagination, although he also draws occasionally on other ancient mythologies and on Milton's <u>Paradise Lost</u>. However, the poet then modifies and reworks his traditional material radically, using such devices as reversal, exaggeration, ambiguity, extension, reinterpretation, and new metaphors for old, forgotten or neglected parts of the myths. Drawing on modern science and his own imagination and moral vision, Thomas produces mythic poems that, in their various views of God and his relationship with creation, can be at times provocative, even alarming, as well as very modern.

Before proceeding, one ought to pause to define "myth." A myth, as I shall use the term hereafter, is a metaphorical story describing the relationship between ultimate reality or the sacred and the world as human beings experience it, a

relationship that gives meaning and value to that world.[7] The characters, events, and setting of a myth need not be taken literally; to do so is to apply an inappropriate standard more suited to science. As Barbara Sproul reiterates in her introduction to Primal Myths, myths express attitudes to facts and reality; they provide the fundamental structures of understanding that enable human beings to relate to facts. Their truth is existential, not necessarily theoretical.[8] Through myths, the multifarious world of perception and experience is organised and so given meaning, as Jesuit literary critic William Noon recognises in his succinct definition of myth as "a sustained metaphorical organization of experience."[9]

One of the most theologically and artistically influential of Western myths has been the Judaeo-Christian myths of creation, found in Genesis 1-3. Most people are unaware that there are actually two separate creation myths in the opening chapters of the Bible. Instead, the order of events from the first account is usually combined in the popular imagination with the method of creating mankind, the naming of the beasts, Eden, and the Fall from the second account and the whole treated as one continuous story. However, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German scholars, sharpening their analytical tools on the Pentateuch, discovered that it is in fact composed of four different documents, which they labelled J, E, D, and P.[10] The glaring inconsistencies between the two creation accounts (glaring once one really looks at them) are explained by the fact that they are part of different documents. Since the discussion in this chapter will refer to the two accounts, a brief description of each follows.

The first account, Gen. 1-2:4a, comes from P, the Priestly school of thought. Of the four documents, P is the latest, dated after the exile (about 500 B.C.). P is sacerdotal and, accordingly, Genesis 1 is more a creed than a story. It has a liturgical aura and its style is appropriately measured, repetitious, formulaic, and ordered. Creation is described from God's point of view and God is presented abstractly as wholly transcendent; he is omnipotent, omniscient, serene, and majestic. He creates by his word alone, an expression of his will. Creation means bringing order out of chaos, his elementary material, which P views as a watery deep. All things are called forth by his word and given their place and function. The time of creation is divided into seven days, each allotted its unique event. The order of creation is heaven, earth, light, the firmament, the dry land, grasses and trees, luminaries, sea creatures, birds, cattle and beasts, and human beings, male and female. Woman is given equality with man, both being made at the same time in God's image and both given dominion over the earth.

The second account, Gen. 2: 4b-3: 24, comes from J, the Yahwist writer. Of the four documents, J is the earliest. His creation story dates in written form from about the tenth century B.C., but its origins are much older. J is an artist, a story-teller with a flair for vivid dramatic narrative and characters. The main impulse behind his creation story is not liturgical but aetiological: why are things the way they are in human life? His style is concrete, vivid, bold, and economical, and his point of view is earth-centred. P describes the making "of the heavens and of the earth" (Gen. 2: 4a) while J describes the creation of "the earth and the heavens" (4b). J's god, Yahweh, is a colourful character, an anthropomorphic being who plants a garden, walks in it, talks to his creatures, makes mistakes, and asks questions to which he ought to know the answers. Unlike P's God in his remote heavens, Yahweh is close to mankind, emotionally, psychologically, and spatially. He creates with his hands out of clay and his starting point is not watery chaos but a dry, barren earth. J's order of creation differs greatly from P's: earth, heaven, mist, man, trees, rivers, beasts and cattle, birds, and woman, and the conclusion of his narrative has been interpreted to subordinate woman to man, with disastrous results historically for women. Of the two accounts, both important in their effects on Western culture, J's has been more important as an artistic influence.

The biblical accounts provide Thomas with his basic framework. Like the writers of the Bible and most ancient mythologies, Thomas in his creation poems assumes first that there is a creation and a beginning, that the cosmos has not always existed, as for example the Jains, Aristotle, and the holders of the now discredited Steady-State theory of cosmogony all believe.[11] Further, he assumes that there is a Creator, God, who is responsible for the making of the cosmos in its present form, and that the creation takes place over time, not instantaneously. Moreover, this God performs the creation by word or deed ex nihilo. God does not give birth to creation, form it from the body of a primeval being, create it from his own body, or cause it to be created from an egg, all methods that can be found in other mythologies. In all the creation poems, with the possible exception of "The Tool" (LS), Thomas clearly sees God in orthodox Judaeo-Christian fashion as sole creator and sole deity.

Thomas follows Judaeo-Christian tradition not just in his cosmogony but also in his concern with the problem of suffering. Behind many ancient creation myths, including that of J in Gen 2-3, lies an aetiological impulse: why are things the way they are? Why is the world, human society, human nature, what one experiences them to be? The mythological mind goes back to the beginning for answers, which are to be found in the events and the actions of the gods and

superhuman figures of "that time" and which provide the cause and even the validation of the way the world is. Thomas too looks at his world and wonders why? Why is there so much suffering? In Not That He Brought Flowers, which immediately precedes the volumes containing most of Thomas's creation poems, there is a fine poem entitled "After the Lecture." The poem begins, "I am asking the difficult question," and it implies clearly that the question concerns the existence of suffering, "pain, / Evil, deformity." The second poem in H'm, "Petition," also expresses the poet's agony over witnessing helplessly the pain and suffering in the world. This ancient troubling question was clearly in Thomas's mind, then, at the time he wrote his versions of a creation myth.

The answer of orthodox Christian theology to the problem of suffering centres on the myth of Genesis 3, J's story of Adam, Eve, the serpent, and the Tree. Influenced by St. Augustine, Christian theology has traditionally interpreted this story in the doctrine of the Fall: the primal human pair loses an original perfect world and state of existence by their own sinful actions and are thrown, dragging all nature with them, into the contingent world of time, labour, mortality, pain, and brokenness. Milton provides a convenient summary of this doctrine in the opening lines of Paradise Lost, one of its most influential imaginative purveyors, when he declares his theme to be that

> Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit
> Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
> With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
> Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat . . .
> (I.1-5).

The doctrine of the Fall forms a key part of the theology of St. Paul, who sees Christ as the second Adam, whose obedience even unto death on his tree, the cross, provides the means for mankind to escape the consequences of the Fall and to regain Paradise.

Not surprisingly, the traditional theological doctrine of the Fall does not satisfy Thomas, one of the least dogmatic or doctrinal of Christian poets. His search for an answer to the problem of suffering leads him in the creation poems, not to any human actions responsible, but rather to the nature of God. He asks not what did we do? but, in Brian Morris's words, "What kind of God could be responsible for the universe as humanity experiences it?"[12] Thomas sometimes seeks to discover the nature of God from the details of the physical universe, but just as often he works backwards from humankind's experiential situation, and his answer is not always complimentary to the deity. Unlike Milton, Thomas is not interested in theodicy. In fact, he is more likely to

accuse God in his poems than to excuse or justify him. For Thomas, aetiology leads to theology: the nature of God, including the related subjects of his relations with the cosmos and with humanity, along with the nature of human beings and the relationship between man and woman are the foci of Thomas's creation poems, as indeed of the biblical creation stories. Though not theodical, Thomas's myths are thus deeply theological.

Although his creation myths have some elements in common--for example, like J, they all focus on the making of earth and its creatures, rather than, like P, presenting a more sweeping cosmogony--Thomas does not present a consistent picture of God. His different conceptions of the deity, as of creation itself, reflect a variety of insights: Yahwist, pagan, Christian, scientific, and those of his own imagination. The various conceptions are not consistent, but Thomas does not intend them to be. Rather he seems to be experimenting, exploring different understandings of God, different "gods" in his aetiological search. As Brian Morris notes, discussing Thomas's exploration of the nature of God, the God of the myth poems "is less a person than a postulate, or a series of postulates, or the several facets of one postulate."[13] Thomas does not intend to present all of these postulates as his own; indeed, his purpose is sometimes critical. In a 1981 interview with J. B. Lethbridge, he comments, "I think there's a certain amount of misunderstanding of my work, a lot of my work is ironic. . . .What I'm tilting at is not God, but the ideas of God."[14] Such a statement seems to apply, for example, to "Rough" or "The Island."

## The Yahwist Influence

Reference to P and J reminds one that differing conceptions of God are in fact another way in which Thomas is true to biblical tradition. The Bible itself presents different concepts of God, and the contrasts between them can be startling, as the two creation stories demonstrate. In much of his work, Thomas describes a God who is closer to P's picture of God as a serene, transcendent, dehumanised deity than to J's colourful anthropomorphic Yahweh. Yet, of the creation poems, only "Once" and "The Coming" (both in H'm) seem to present such a distant deity. In "Once," God is barely present. As the poem opens he creates Adam, not by commanding, but by looking. Then in line 6, the abrupt sentence "God spoke" implicitly introduces the creation of a habitable earth and its creatures, which occurs in the white space separating lines 7a and 7b, while Adam is hiding. God is not mentioned again, even in the creation of Eve, perhaps because the poem is spoken by Adam, whose perceptions are its subject. In "The Coming," the physical point of view is

heaven and God observes the earth apparently from a great distance. Although God possesses a hand, the reader's impression of God in the poem is of transcendence and remote majesty, perhaps because of the echoes of Paradise Lost that one hears in the poem.

Much more influential in the creation poems is the anthropomorphic conception of God in the J strand of the Pentateuch, which derives from ancient Judaism.[15] Harold Bloom describes J's Yahweh as "at once human-all-too-human, even childlike, even childish, and yet Yahweh and none other, which is to say, wholly incommensurate even with himself."[16] Yahweh's humanness includes the display of passionate emotions (such as jealousy, rage, frustration, pride, and irritation), blood-thirstiness, arbitrariness, and the ability to make mistakes and learn from experience.

In "Echoes" (H), one finds just such a human God. The poem begins with a display of God's childish rage:

> What is this? said God. The obstinacy
> Of its refusal to answer
> Enraged him. He struck it
> Those great blows it resounds
> With still.

The uncooperative round earth becomes a punching bag for God. He also forgets his intention to create life and needs the beauty of the healed earth to remind him. Like Yahweh in Gen. 3:9, he calls "Where are you?" and so creates mankind, partly, it seems, to fulfill his need for blood: they build him altars on which "the red blood / Told what he wished to hear." One thinks of Yahweh's acceptance of Abel's blood sacrifice and rejection of Cain's vegetable offering. The belligerent temper and brutality of a pugnacious deity might seem unbiblical, but one has only to remember the Yahweh who destroys every living thing on earth outside the ark, afflicts people with diseases, wipes out two entire cities, kills the first-born of every Egyptian, high and low, and, growing increasingly impatient with the wandering, rebellious Israelites, threatens seriously to annihilate the entire nation (Num. 14:11-2). There is a dark, demonic side to God in certain of Thomas's mythic poems, as there is to Yahweh.[17]

"Other" (H) stresses not God's irascibility and violence, but his envy and human ambivalence about his creation, in a poem that is a complex and satisfying mythic tale. God is presented in the traditional Judaeo-Christian way as a father, not just to Israel or mankind but also, in what is new, to the whole of the earth, including the water and vegetation. Creation is both his work and, perhaps because it is alive, his offspring and thus part of himself in a way more immediate than that in which a work of art reflects its maker. So Thomas writes:

> Its waters
> Were as clear as his own eye. The grass
> Was his breath. The mystery
> Of the dark earth was what went on
> In himself.

The metaphors in the last two sentences express the mystery of the identity in a eucharistic way, as the poet moves from simile to metaphor, with its closer identification between tenor and vehicle. Sacred and natural are deeply intertwined, as is characteristic of mythic vision. Thomas may also hint at a traditional mythic cosmogony in which the god gives birth to the cosmos, but the hints remain oblique, as they do in the Bible itself: J. P. Fokkelson points out that the last verse of the P account of creation contains the Hebrew noun toledot, literally "begettings," which is used generally of human fathers. To Fokkelson, its reference to God in "the generations [or begettings] of the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 2:4a) "raises the radical question whether heaven and earth may be the objects of God's begetting. The word toledot is, then, a metaphor which, approaching the boundaries of the taboo in Israel's strict sexual morals, carries the oblique suggestion that the cosmos may have originated in a sexual act of God."[18] In other myths, for example, such an act could be masturbation or sexual intercourse with a female deity or with the earth.

God's relation to this perfect idyllic creation is expressed with the ambivalence of the human parent:

> He loved and
> Hated it with a parent's
> Conceit, admiring his own
> Work, resenting its
> Independence.

The love-hate relationship Yahweh has with his people in J is extended to the whole of creation. Thomas audaciously presents God as afflicted with sexual jealousy, and this envy leads God deliberately to destroy "the long peace / Of the place." In a sense it is God who falls in this poem, not man. Looked at another way, God takes the part of Milton's Satan in Paradise Lost, plotting the destruction of Eden's peace out of envy and resentment. Either way, this God is morally flawed.

God's agent, his serpent, is the machine, whose song of money snares men and women like flies in a web, "To be sucked empty." But like the mythic human meddler, Pandora, God finds that he cannot control what he has unwisely released: "Enough, enough, / He commanded, but the machine / Looked at him and went on singing." God is neither omniscient (since he does not foresee the catastrophic results of his little mischief) nor omnipotent, and the evil of materi-

alism and greed that he releases can neither be contained nor removed. The juxtaposition of God's plan and the machine's appearance implies that the machine is God's creation, but it is made for destruction, out of an impulse of divine envy and hatred, not of love. In his emotions and limitations, his inability to see the widespread disastrous consequences that one small act of evil may have, this fallen deity is anthropomorphic in more than a superficial sense.

Thomas's original reworking of tradition takes a different form in "The Hand" (LS), a grotesque yet arresting mythic tale that focuses on God's relationship with humanity. In this poem Thomas recasts one of the more mysterious incidents in Genesis, Jacob's desperate wrestling match with an unknown adversary (Gen. 32: 24-9). Subsequent tradition and interpretation provides several candidates for the "man": he has been seen as a troll, an angel (perhaps Michael or Sammael, the angel of death, or Yahweh pretending to be Sammael), or Yahweh himself.[19] Thomas identifies the man as God, following Protestant tradition and Jacob himself, who, reflecting on his ordeal, concludes that "I have seen God face to face" (v. 30). However, the poet makes drastic changes in detail and emphasis to the biblical original, which in effect make it a completely new myth. The narrative point of view moves from Jacob to God, and it is God's thoughts, feelings, and actions that constitute the centre of interest. God is still "a man," anthropomorphic in the sense that he possesses sight, hands, a side, a heart, sensation, and emotion, but while his "humanity" is heightened in the poem, ironically his opponent's is decreased, as Jacob becomes "a hand." The synecdoche emphasises that God's opponent is the human race, not a specific human being, Jacob, with a past and a future.

In "The Hand," Thomas presents a God who seems strangely, humanly vulnerable, partly through a contrast with the hand and partly through the emotions his humanised God experiences. The hand--that is, mankind--is primarily a doer: "Are there not deeds / to be done, children to make, poems / to be written?" it cries. Its actions, and by implication human ingenuity and intelligence, are both creative and destructive: God foresees "cities / the hand would build, engines / that it would raze them with." The hand seems capable of distinction in both directions. Cities are a considerable human technical achievement, whereas "raze" indicates complete annihilation. The hand displays utter confidence and pathetic arrogance when, unlike Jacob, it attacks God; it cannot be said to act in self-defence, since it cannot know that God is tempted to undo it. Like Jacob, it demands to know God's name, promising in return, in an apparent appeal to God's vanity, to "write it / in bright gold," that is, to preserve it in a work of art. The hand's request is more audacious and aggressive than might appear:

it is in fact a bid for supremacy over God, a linguistic victory, since to archaic peoples, words and uttering words have magic power, and knowing a god's name might give one power over it.[20] At least, according to Ernest Cassirer, knowing and speaking the name of something means that one knows and speaks its essence[21]--the name is the essence--and knowing the essence of God, the hand could claim equality with God. The hand's hubris represents in different form the reason the primal human beings fall in Genesis 3, the desire to "be as gods" (3:5). Finally, the hand is utterly egocentric, or better, anthropocentric, and believes that "The world / is without meaning, awaiting / my coming." Meaning and worth are subjective and proceed from internal human reality. The hand thus denies that it is God's eternal presence that confers meaning on the world.

The hand's brash confidence and aggressiveness highlight the more thoughtful, complex character of God. The hand is apparently his creation, though he seems surprised, even taken aback when he sees it. His profound uneasiness is expressed in physical sensation, "a coldness / about his heart, as though the hand clasped it." Divine unease is reinforced later when, having picked up the hand, he feels its "nails / in his side, the unnerving warmth of the contact." The pun on nails adds to the black humour in the poem, but also alludes to the crucifixion, conflating the wounds in Christ's hands and side. The consequence of allowing the hand to live will be not only its creative and destructive actions but also God's own death on the cross. Obliquely, the poem reveals love and self-sacrifice to be part of God's nature.

Though God has foreknowledge, he is not perfect. He wonders if creating the hand has been a mistake and is tempted to destroy it, providing a subtle echo of Gen. 3. The hand, with its creative and destructive abilities, reflects something of his own nature, is made in his image, is even part of himself, as in "Other." The agon with the hand is "the long war with himself / always foreseen," an externalisation of an internal conflict. The poem suggests that God too is capable of destruction, though the only destructive act he contemplates he does not perform.

The ambiguous nature of the hand, humanity, is again revealed when, in answer to his own question, What is the hand for?, God replies with another ironic question: "The immaculate conception / preceding the delivery / of the first tool?" The reproductive metaphor in these lines suggests an added complexity to Thomas's picture of God: just as he fathers the Virgin's baby, does he not also have a share in the production of the first tool? By giving humanity its intelligence, ingenuity, and creativity, God allows for their possible misuse. Because it can also be used to create cities and art, for example, the tool carries on the creative/destructive polarity of the hand and God.

In the end God is merciful. In another reversal of the original story, God dominates the wrestling match (he has the upper hand, so to speak). He does not ask to be let go, as Jacob's opponent does, but rather lets the hand go, significantly without blessing. The blessing in J's Genesis stories has great importance. God gives it to Abram and the chosen people, Jacob tricks Esau out of his, and in the wrestling story, Jacob refuses to let the stranger go "except thou bless me" (32:26). The hand, humanity, gets no blessing, perhaps because of God's great mistrust and forboding towards it. God's parting words are made more emphatic by alliteration: "Messenger to the mixed things / of your making, tell them I am." The hand gets no blessing, but it is made God's messenger to his people, the role of the angels and prophets. God has also obliquely told the hand what it wished to know. "I am" means "I exist" but is also the name God reveals to Moses, his messenger, out of the burning bush:

> And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shall thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. (Ex.3:13-4)

"The Hand" is one of Thomas most satisfying mythic poems, provocative and engaging on different levels.

The violence and bloodthirstiness of Yahweh, encountered in "Echoes," appears again in extreme form in "The Island" (H), which, with "Amen" (LS) and "Rough" (LS), are among Thomas's most disturbing poems. God in this poem is a truly horrific deity, whose spiteful malevolent power knows no bounds. He forces his worship on the unlucky islanders, yet by unjustly rewarding "centuries of hard work / And patience" only with "poverty and sickness," he makes his choice of them a curse instead of a blessing. All of a piece are the harshness of their lives, the hostility of their natural environment, and their worship in a church as hard and dark as they are, and all are decreed by this demonic God. Even prayer is corrupted in a deliberately repulsive image: it causes the people's lips to "suppurate," a sight that God apparently enjoys. The worst of his acts comes last: "their women shall bring forth / On my altars, and I will choose the best / Of them to be thrown back into the sea."

In portraying such a destructive God, Thomas draws on the harshest elements of three traditions: the Old Testament, "pagan" conceptions of God, and a hardhearted Calvinism, which makes God, in Muir's words, "three angry letters in a book." The infant sacrifice of the poem is characteris-

tic of both ancient Hebrew and pagan religion. One remembers the intended sacrifice of Isaac, in which Yahweh tells Abram to offer his only son, child of the Promise, as a burnt offering (Gen. 22:1-19). One can find much evidence in the Old Testament of infant and child sacrifice. The people among whom the Israelites came to live were worshippers of Baal, and part of that worship involved the immolation of children in a great pit called a Tophet, named after the drums that beat to drown out the cries of the burning children.[22] Nigel Davies points out that God's claim to the firstborn, human and animal, in Exodus and Numbers originally meant that they were sacrificed to him. "The custom of child sacrifice had deep roots among the Hebrews."[23] Human, especially child, sacrifice was widespread among the peoples of the ancient world.

The technique of the poem accentuates the unlovable nature of this God. Thomas uses a very traditional form, the sonnet, for what is, even in the twentieth century, a very unorthodox view of God. The separation of the last line of the sestet ("And that was only on one island") is unusual but indicates a change from God's words to the narrator's and also emphasises the black humour of the latter's trenchant comment, with its invitation to imagine what such a demonic God will get up to on the next island. Thomas employs a biblical style in the poem, imitating the solemn, measured formality of Genesis 1 in the KJV, especially in his frequent use of "and" to begin a sentence, the parallel clauses in the future tense, and the beginning words, "And God said," which punctuate P's account of creation like a tolling bell: verses 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 21, 24, 26. The contrast between God's benevolent creative actions in Genesis 1 and this God's sadistic activity is thus emphasised. The latter's hard implacable purpose is hammered home by the relentless sequence of future verbs with their "wills" and "shalls," implying no room for reconsideration, placation, mercy, or love.

The situation of the people described in the octave strikes a familiar note to a reader of Thomas. The islanders resemble the hill people, his parishioners, the subjects of much of his early poetry. One suspects that Thomas used their lives, somewhat exaggerated, as a model and, applying a popular religious assumption that everything in one's life is sent from God, worked backwards from their lives to the kind of God who might be responsible. The resulting deity in this poem is a sadist. On the evidence of his other poems, Thomas does not hold this belief himself but is here tilting at popular ideas of God, in this case the idea that God is personally responsible for everyone's nature and circumstance, which is a comfortable belief until one examines it closely. Harold Kushner, discussing the Book of Job, points out that people's difficulties in understanding it stem from their attempts to believe three incompatible principles at

once: that God is omnipotent and causes everything that happens, that God is good and ensures that everyone gets what he deserves, and that Job is a good man. He suggests that to understand why good people suffer, one must give up the first belief.[24] Thomas in this poem explores what happens if one gives up the second.

The God of "Rough" is equally deranged. Thomas again works backwards, not from human society this time but from the natural order, including human beings, and the assumptions he examines are drawn from pre-twentieth-century science: the Newtonian and Deist model of the world as a "self-regulating machine" (a view he strongly rejects) and a reductionist Darwinian view of the natural order as only a merciless struggle for survival[25]:

> God looked at the eagle that looked at
> the wolf that watched the jackrabbit
> cropping the grass, green and curling
> as God's beard. He stepped back;
> it was perfect, a self-regulating machine
> of blood and faeces.

The last phrase aptly combines Newtonian and Darwinian views. The rhythm and syntax of the first sentence unmistakably recall such accumulative nursery stories as "The House that Jack Built." There is an element here of the genuine folk tale, such as those collected by the Grimm brothers, in which exist terrible cruelty and terrifying, larger-than-life characters, like this God. As in other of Thomas's creation poems, God senses an absence and quickly adds "a faint reflection of himself" to his mechanical order. The human creature proves a ruthless dominating addition, upsetting the predatory chain of eaters and eaten by preying on them all. Considering that such a creature is but a faint reflection of its creator, one ought not to be surprised at God's next action, but nonetheless it seems appalling: God afflicts humanity with a revolting disfiguring disease, apparently in order to limit human destructive power: "the limbs modelled an obscene / question, the head swelled, out of the eyes came / tears of pus." Worse is God's deranged reaction: "There was the sound / of thunder, the loud, uncontrollable laughter of / God, and in his side, like an incurred stitch, Jesus."

Commenting on this puzzling passage, A. E. Dyson points to the human "sowing" of myxomatosis among rabbits, with similar symptoms to those described, and plausibly suggests that this "schizoid" creator-god may be a reflection of mankind itself as much as the reverse: "If man treats the creation over which he has godlike powers in this way, might this be after all more the God that man makes in his image than the other way around?"[26] If one looks only at "savage" nature and the demonic side of mankind, which is capable of

great cruelty and ruthless destruction, one could certainly arrive at the deranged God of "Rough" as their creator. However, Thomas adds one final puzzling note to the poem: in the side of this demonic deity gone out of control, there is "like an incurred stitch, Jesus." In "Cain" (H), God says that the lamb, type of Christ and part of himself, was torn from his side. Here, the lamb is still, so to speak, in place and presumably still represents an aspect of God himself. The simile of the stitch in the side suggests both that Jesus is an inescapable part of God and that he possibly acts as a kind of brake on God's manic activities, since one incurs a stitch when one overexerts and the pain of it forces one to slow down. The poem remains puzzling, but one can conclude with Dyson that, "whatever we make of God here and in other poems, Jesus goes with him; and with Jesus go the nails, the Cross, the pain."[27]

The relationship between a human-like God and woman is the subject of "The Woman" (F). One of J's original contributions to the story of creation is the creation of woman. No other surviving creation myth of the ancient Near East has such an account.[28] Yahweh the artisan, having worked his way unsuccessfully through the animal world in a fruitless attempt to find an appropriate mate and equal for the man, finally abandons clay for ribs and fashions woman as the final act of his creation. Thomas devotes three poems to this part of J's creation story, and "The Woman" is the best of them. It shows the most influence from J, being a much livelier poem than the other two, with greater emphasis on narration. The woman is a strong character in the tradition of such J heroines as Rebecca and Rachel. She intimidates God with her beauty and sexuality: he "quails at her approach," wonders why he ever made her so beautiful, and is nearly drawn in by desire himself when he looks deeply through her eyes into the future. The time span implies that she is Woman, rather than an individual, like Eve.

The woman audaciously proposes a bargain with God, a settlement of their quarrel over possession of man, who comes off as rather unimportant in this poem: "You can have all the credit / for its invention," she offers, "if you will leave the ordering / of it to me." She speaks confidently, as to an equal, which turns out to be a mistake. One cannot get the upper hand of God; whether deliberately or not, he changes the terms of the bargain and, taking men's minds for his own, grants her their bodies, thus effectively limiting her power to the sphere of sex. In addition, the price she pays for this power is apparently menstruation, though childbirth may also be alluded to: "They shall come to you for ever / with their desire, and you shall bleed for them in return." The myth is thus partly aetiological, like Genesis 3. Syntactically, God's decree in lines 18-19 echoes his curse on woman in Gen. 3:16, but although woman is humbled and left with a good deal less than she wanted,

God's words do not seem to be a curse. In fact, Thomas's "desire" recalls Yahweh's curse on Eve, "thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee" (3:16), but God's words are the reverse of Yahweh's curse. Moreover, God's use of the thorn from his own side "for the letting of ordained blood" links him and the woman. Both bleed for man. Woman suffers on one level what the crucified Christ does on another, and the blood of both is "ordained" by God. The attitude to menstrual blood in the poem radically reverses that in the ritual tradition of the Old Testament, which treats it as unclean and polluting, a tabu. "The Woman" is one of Thomas's most audacious and original myths.

## The Christian Influence

Although the Yahwist influence dominates Thomas's conceptions of God in the creation poems, some of them present a God coloured by Christian insights and details. The nails in "The Hand," the stitch in "Rough," and the thorn in God's side in "The Woman" are hints of the Christian view of God, but other poems are more direct. "Making" (H) offers the story of Creation told by an anthropomorphic God in a monologue. The Creator, somewhat childlike in his innocent simple pleasure in his own creativity, has "built" earth as a home and now embarks on a little interior decorating. He proudly claims "I thought up the flowers / Then birds. I found the bacteria . . . ." The animals exist "to divert me." In Milton, Adam dreams during the creation of Eve; in this poem, God dreams "Of a likeness," which, upon awakening, he carefully fashions to music. His relationship with it, he says, is love. He is "in love with it / For itself, giving it freedom / To love me; risking the disappointment." The poem proclaims selfless love as a divine attibute, an insight central to Christianity. The concept of free will, so important to a theodicy like Paradise Lost, is recast here: freedom to choose to do God's will becomes freedom to love God. In the end, the two are the same, but the emphasis on love rather than will in this poem makes God not a judge but a lover, even a parent, who is, unlike Yahweh, neither possessive nor demanding, but respectful of the freedom of the one loved.

Out of such love and disappointment come, in Christian myth and theology, the Incarnation and Crucifixion, and Thomas works these explicitly into the conception of God in several poems, including "The Tool," with its shadowy Creator and a vulnerable character named God, who, like Adam and Eve, "knew he was naked and withdrew himself." "God" can be seen as God the Son, or perhaps the God who identifies with mankind and becomes incarnate, as opposed to the God who creates. This interpretation is strengthened by allusions to the Incarnation and Crucifixion that appear in the culmin-

ation of the poem. As the newly-created human being holds the tool in its hand, "the alternatives / of the tree sharpened." A creation of J,[29] the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is traditionally held to confer ethical knowledge, the knowledge of good and evil,[30] an interpretation Thomas retains. As the man acquires the tool, his potential increases to do good and especially evil, "the alternatives of the tree." "Sharpened" suggests both the clarification of ethical alternatives and the physical tool itself with the danger that it poses. Although a tool can produce good or evil, here it seems associated mainly with evil since its sound drowns out God's voice, and later it attacks him, thereby giving its answer to his plea for forgiveness. God speaks to the man "out of the tree's / wholeness"; that is, he possesses the ethical knowledge of the tree, but also in a more literal sense he seems physically associated with it, standing beside it or perhaps speaking out of its branches. In mediaeval depictions of the tree, the serpent coils around the trunk and its woman's head speaks from the branches. God takes the place of the serpent here, but, unlike the serpent with its partial knowledge, he speaks to the man from complete knowledge, and so "out of the tree's wholeness." God's identification with the tree also suggests the Crucifixion, God's death on that other tree, which in Christian tradition was fashioned from the wood of the first tree and set up in its place.[31] In fact, a mediaeval Italian fresco depicts Christ crucified on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.[32]

Foiled by evil in his attempts to communicate with a dangerous mankind, God responds in a way that suggests both the Incarnation and Crucifixion: he comes to the man in his own vulnerability and allows the man to wound him with the tool. "Came forth / in his nakedness" describes both God's movement to meet the man in the poem and the Incarnation, the birth of God as a helpless naked infant. "His" in "his nakedness" can refer both to God and to the human creature, whose nakedness God appropriates--a fruitful ambiguity. "Suffering the tool's / insolence in his own body" refers to the Crucifixion; "suffering," which means both "allowing" and "feeling pain," concisely conveys his acceptance of this death.

God's words to the man, "forgive me," suggest why he becomes incarnate, but the reason for God's sense of guilt is not obvious. There is, however, a suggestion to be found in the creation of the man: "Pain," said / the voice, and the creature stood up, its mind folded / on darkness." Pain and the darkness of ignorance and misery define the human condition by divine decree from the beginning. There is no paradisal Eden, no prelapsarian bliss, and no fall. Weakness and pain are inherent in "God" as in mankind and the nature of things. "Forgive me" recalls in reverse form Jesus' words

on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

The ambiguity in the depiction of God in "The Tool" is paralleled by ambiguity on the question of human culpability. The man is created with a dark mind, which suggests at once ignorance (possibly mere innocence in a newly-created being) and evil. The creature puts out a hand, like Adam in Michaelangelo's fresco of the creation of man, "as though to implore / wisdom," but "as though" leaves the motive for its action uncertain. It may desire wisdom or it may be acting deceitfully. The tool appears almost by magic in the man's hand, whether with or against his will one does not know. Nor is one told who creates the tool; it could well be the voice, which created the dark mind. As in "The Hand," God bears some responsibility for the tool. The poem certainly seems to implicate the Creator in the existence of evil and the misery of the human condition.

## The Scientific Influence

Finally, Thomas's depiction of God and his act of creation is influenced by science. (Thomas's use of science in his poetry as a whole will be dealt with in detail in Chapter Six.) "Rough" borrows its model of the universe from Newton and Darwin. "The Tool," with its swarming germs, hints at a long process of creation, while in "Once" and "Dialogue" (LS), Thomas is more direct about method. In the other creation poems, God creates with a word or a look, a thought, an intention, an action, even a wave of "his slow wand" ("Female" [H]). The desired result is instantly there. In "Once" and "Dialogue," Thomas describes a process of creation that blends evolution with the idea of a creator God. The attempt is not new, of course, and continues today,[33] but Thomas approaches the problem as a poet, not as a scientist. "Once," for example, preserves the order of creation given by J in Genesis 2, but modifies that biblical framework by borrowing from geology its conception of the starting situation. Rather than a cool earth watered by mist, Thomas's Adam sees a smoking earth and a hot sea, details geologically accurate for a young earth before life developed. It is only when the earth cools enough for dew to form that life can appear: "the mingled chorus / Of weeds and flowers" and the embryonic forms on the tree bark: "the many faces / Of life, forms hungry for birth, / Mouthing at me." These two vivid images skilfully and concisely suggest the profusion of life. In this poem, God creates but, unlike Yahweh, he remains very much in the background, and one gets the sense of a process initiated and then watched over by a hidden creator.

A more striking and original poem is "The Gap" (F), one of Thomas's best mythic narratives. A fruitful marriage of

theology, myth, and science, "The Gap" explores the relationship between language, knowledge, and God. Based on J's aetiological story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9), which purports to explain the origin of different languages, the poem features a tongue-in-cheek portrait of an anthropomorphic God, drawn from Yahwist and other primitive sources, who suddenly reveals himself as the mystery at the heart of the cosmos, a mystery that frustrates the human search for knowledge. Like Yahweh, God is presented in human terms, though the particulars are not characteristic of Yahweh himself. God "reclines" on the air, a word suggesting decadent Roman emperors or oriental despots. He sleeps aloft, has nightmares, and awakens. Amusingly, he worries: "No, no, no, / wider than that!" and puzzles over his problem. Physically located in the air as he is, he leans over to look down at the human dictionary. The incongruous concrete pictures thus evoked are part of the humour in the first sixteen lines of the poem.

This God is remote and inactive, asleep like the Baal of Elijah's opponents in 1 Kings 18, and unlike Yahweh in Genesis 11, who "came down to see the city and the tower" (11:5). Except for preventing completion of the tower, this God does not interfere in human affairs. His remoteness and inactivity marks him as a <u>deus otiosus</u> or indifferent god. In myth, a <u>deus otiosus</u> is a supreme creator god who, tired, retreats to the sky away from his creation, from humanity and its practice of religion; he is forgotten and replaced by other deities, to be remembered and called upon only in extremity, as a final resort.[34] Such a withdrawn inactive deity also recalls a more modern conception, that of the watchmaker God of eighteenth-century science and the deists. This God, once having set his mechanistic universe going, is no longer needed and withdraws.

In this poem, God is like Yahweh in one important respect, his overwhelming concern for boundaries, his desire to maintain a distance, the "gap" of the title, between humanity and himself. Yahweh's need for such a gap is evident in his expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, his frustration of the construction of the tower of Babel, which was intended to "reach unto heaven" (11:4),[35] and his repeated, rather nervous injunctions to Moses at Sinai to "charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish. . . . Let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto the Lord, lest he break forth upon them" (Ex. 19: 21, 24). In the poem, as in this passage from Exodus, the gap is metaphysical distance represented as physical distance.

On the other side of the gap is humanity and its "tower of speech," a concrete symbol for the voracious human quest for <u>scientia</u> or knowledge, pursued through language, and for the power such knowledge, such naming, brings. In the Bible, the tower of Babel is made of brick, and the building of it

to "reach unto heaven" represents human hubris, the desire to assert the race against God himself, "lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4). God specifically says that the source of mankind's power is its common language, which will enable men and women to do whatever they imagine (v. 6). In Thomas's myth, language is again connected with power, but this time through knowledge. The tower is built of words instead of bricks; words themselves, "vocabulary," are the weapons used in the contest with the world and ultimately with God (the idea of a contest is implicit in the word "triumphed" in line 8). As mentioned earlier, for ancient peoples, words conquer by naming and defining. To know the name of a thing is to have power over it. Further, defining and naming assuage "the verbal hunger / for the thing in itself," since, within the world of myth, to define a word or thing is to encompass it, to know and understand it, to come into contact with it in its essence. The ultimate knowledge is knowledge of God; the tower needs one more word to contact God: the "thin gap" is "a chasm a / word could bridge."

This state of affairs God cannot abide. In the human search to discover the nature of God, a search represented by the tower, God declines to be discovered. He leans over "the dictionary / they used" and

> the darkness
> that is a god's blood swelled
> in him, and he let it
> to make the sign in the space
> on the page, that is in all languages
> and none; that is the grammarian's
> torment and the mystery
> at the cell's core, and the equation
> that will not come out, and is
> the narrowness that we stare
> over into the eternal
> silence that is the repose of God.

The darkness of God's blood suggests mystery as the essence of the divine nature, and this mystery is God's definition of himself for human consumption: a "sign," yet not a word--words are human. The sign is to be found at the heart of all things. It is enigmatic, unexpected, and paradoxical, and it frustrates human attempts to encompass all knowledge and explain all phenomena within a single, consistent, complete theory. It is the insoluble equation, the problem that in principle cannot be solved, what some scientists call "the X factor." These lines suggest that the universe is deeply informed with the nature of God, the mark or "sign" of God, which cannot be neatly encompassed by human reason. Since God is reflected in the very heart of things, the universe is both meaningful and unified.

God's efforts to protect himself are successful: the narrow gap is preserved. God's sleep is reasserted at the end of the poem: "the eternal / silence that is the repose of God," calm, peaceful, at rest, a silence that gives nothing away.

## The Machine, the Tool, and the Fall

Earlier, I said that Thomas's mythic poems arise partly out of his search for an answer to the question, why is there suffering? As he explores answers through different mythic stories and views of God, he rarely absolves God from some responsibility. In "Echoes," God's blows are responsible for the pain and suffering of the earth; in "Other," they are caused by his creation, the machine. In "Rough" and "The Island," he deliberately and sadistically inflicts suffering on his unfortunate people. In "Soliloquy" (H) he promises them destruction through his servants, the viruses. Only in "Making" does God seem entirely benevolent, creating a free being and loving it for itself. Even when God does not cause the suffering directly, he is implicated by his creation of an imperfect mankind, a "hand" with grandiose ambition and destructive capability, a tool-user with a dark mind, man with "his many / Devices" ("Repeat"), the flawed creatures of a bungling God in "Soliloquy." Some of these poems clearly present extreme concepts of God which Thomas does not share, but even when one disregards such poems, one finds that God is both creator and destroyer, "the hawk and the dove" ("After the Lecture" [NBF]).

Yet in the mythic poems, humanity also shares responsibility for a world of suffering. The shadow that Adam so boldy inspects in "Once" is spiritual as well as physical. In most of the creation poems, humankind is created either flawed or with the clear potential for evil action, a potential it fulfills. As I indicated in Chapter One, Thomas is not a Pelagian or a follower of Rousseau. He believes that "Man is a fallen creature. . . . I'm very conscious of this something in the human make-up which drives sometimes the best of people to lend themselves to evil."[36] Thomas goes on in the same interview to link this fallenness to technology: "the technical achievement, I mean the minds of these various people that can invent some of the horrors of today. They have more than a little of the diabolical in them, haven't they? They are fallen."[37] In his creation poems, Thomas represents the Fall, not in terms of disobedience and the fruit of a tree, but in terms of technology and its two key symbols, the machine and the tool.[38]

The machine appeared early in Thomas's work: there is Cynddylan on his tractor, for example, in the 1952 volume An Acre of Land. At first Thomas observed an actual machine, usually a tractor in the fields of his rural parish, but

occasionally an airplane ("Tramp" [BT]) or Landrover ("Wedlock" [NBF]). The noise and wheels of the tractor, which separate a farmer like Cynddlylan from the earth beneath his feet and the nature around him, are interpreted by Thomas as alien to both romantic nature mythology and the concept of a pure agrarian Wales, "preserved from large caravan parks and candyfloss-eating tourists and television aerials in every house and tractors rushing down the lanes."[39] The tractor is associated with greed, shallowness, lack of respect for mother earth, denial of the bond with nature, and the rapid exploitation of resources.

With the mythic poems of the 1970s, the machine becomes a more abstract symbol as its setting expands from rural Wales to western industrial society. It is not any specific machine but the Machine, symbol of them all. The Tool, similarly, is not any specific tool but represents them all. This generalising and abstraction of the symbol has been much criticised by, among others, David Harsent, Colin Meir, and Andrew Waterman, the last of whom sees such abstraction as "emotionally inert."[40] In some poems, they are right. "Digest" and "Remedies" (both in H'm) are arid poems of philosophical analysis dominated by prosaic language and latinate polysyllables. In the context of myth, however, the universality achieved by the abstraction of "the Machine" can be appropriate. When the first man and the first woman join hands at the end of "Once" and go "forth to meet the Machine," part of the shock derives from the monolithic and ominous imperviousness of the abstraction that the human pair suddenly run up against at the end of the line. Concrete details about it, specification of a particular kind of machine, would not achieve the same effect. Moreover, Thomas can endow his machine with character when he wishes. The machine in "Other," for example, is chillingly animate and self-absorbed, singing its song of money and ignoring God's command to stop as if he were beneath its attention. References to the song as a web and the villages as "flies / to be sucked empty" give it the predatory character of a spider.

Also, Thomas's creation poems and indeed all his poems are meant to be read together, as a group. According to Anne Price-Owen, Thomas told her that he "expects us to find parallels and to look for cross-references in his poetic works and that he has no desire for his poems to be read in isolation."[41] The creation poems, as Brian Morris writes, "create their own sequence of complex images which accrete meaning from poem to poem,"[42] and one of these images is the machine. When one comes across a bare reference to "the machine" in a certain poem, one remembers all the associations that the words have gathered. Such associations mitigate the abstraction of a bare reference.

The symbolism of the machine and the tool in the mythic poems is straightforward and not new: they are associated

with technology and industrialism and with the attitudes that so often accompany them: materialism in values and philosophy, greed, and exploitation, all inimical to what Thomas sees as the truly human and spiritual. What is original is the way Thomas works these two symbols into his mythic narratives. In the creation poems the machine and, less often, the tool take the place in the Fall of the serpent and the tree. By this means, Thomas strives to reinterpret the old myths to reflect present circumstances.

"Once" is the first poem of the first volume to be dominated by myth, H'm. In it, one sees Adam discovering his new world with delight, wonder, and astonishment. He and Eve are "confederates of the natural day," allies of the natural world and the light. When they join hands, theirs is an action expressing love, the highest of human values. Against this seemingly idyllic world of natural abundance and human values, Thomas abruptly sets, not the serpent or Satan, but the Machine. Its presence is shocking and ominous. By placing it at the end of the line and of the poem, Thomas gives it a threatening presence and suggests that there is no way around it. The Machine raises questions common to other poems: where did it come from? Is it God's creation and if so, as seems likely, is it not both a potential good and God's agent? Also, the sinister Machine sends the reader back through the poem to notice such hints of possible downfall as Adam's bold shadow and the allusion to Paradise Lost in the linked hands. The final image in Milton's poem shows Adam and Eve fallen, cast out from Eden, making their way hand in hand into a dangerous world. The last line to this poem ("We went forth to meet the Machine") can be read in two ways. The first way suggests that Adam and Eve meet the Machine by chance ("We went forth, only to meet the Machine"), which implies their innocence. The second, more likely way is that they met the machine by intent ("We went forth in order to meet the machine"), which implies a fatal attraction to the values represented by the machine and thus a fallenness. (Thomas is adept at suggesting multiple meanings.) The abrupt end of the story does not include the outcome, but the reader can well enough imagine it.

Thomas's use of the machine in "Other" also sets it in opposition to a "perfect" creation with its "long peace." Here the machine is clearly God's agent, but its purpose is to do harm. Thomas stresses the materialism rather than the mechanism associated with the symbol, but the two go together, since use of the machine is propelled by a destructive desire for money. The self-absorbed autonomy of the machine in the myth vividly expresses the common experience that technology, once loosed, develops a life of its own and can quickly escape the control of those who use it. Often technology itself becomes the master. As a later Thomas poem puts it, when machines say "'We are at / your service,'"

they are "laughing / up what would have been sleeves / in the old days" ("Fuel" [EA]).

In "The Hand" and "The Tool," Thomas employs the tool as symbol of human technology and technical values within the creation myth. The tool is connected intimately with the question of the nature of humanity. In "The Hand," God fears the hand's ability to produce "the first tool," which the poem associates both with capitalism and factories and with the instruments of war, through the "engines" the hand would use to "raze" cities. Thomas uses "engines" primarily in the older sense of devices or machines, as in Milton's famous conundrum in Lycidas, "the two-handed engine at the door," but the word also suggests the internal combustion engine. In "The Tool," the gleaming tool, metal and dangerous, appears in the creature's hand almost as soon as the latter is created; the tool's appearance marks a change in pronouns to refer to the creature, from "it" and "its" in lines 13-4 to "him" in line 19, suggesting that it is associated in some way with full humanity. (Anthropologists once defined the human being as a tool-maker, to distinguish him from other primates and early hominids.) The juxtaposition of the tool and the alternatives of the tree implies that the tool may be used for either, but the poem leans toward use for evil. The tool opposes God (whether at the creature's will or autonomously is unclear), prevents the man from hearing God's voice, and refuses a relationship with God, ultimately killing him. The tool's actions suggest through myth how dangerous and dominating technology can be and how it tends to be hostile to the spiritual.

This creation mythology in which man falls when he succumbs to the machine and what it symbolises influences other of Thomas's poems, both those that are in themselves brief myths and those that are not. These poems describe a world dominated by the machine. Its noise stifles wisdom ("Period" [H]), replaces music ("Postscript" [H]), and destroys the peace of the land, a land that the machine disembowels ("Welsh Summer" [LS]). Though it can dispense knowledge, the machine cannot teach wisdom, a product of human experience and reflection. The children in "Digest" "fed the machine / Their questions, knowing the answers / Already, unable to apply them."

In its overwhelming dominance, the machine has no place for God and pushes him out. God complains angrily in "Soliloquy" that in his churches, his people "genuflected / To the machine," while in "God's Story" [LS] he discovers that his chalice is dry and his altar steel, and he can no longer find either mankind or himself "among / the dumb cogs and tireless camshafts."[43] In "No Answer" (H) the machine opposes both God and art: "Over the creeds / And masterpieces our wheels go." The machine makes a poor substitute for God. In the "intolerable" society of the mythic "Similarities" (EA), the whining machine puts "the yawning /

consciences to sleep," dulling people's ability to make ethical choices. "Earth" (H), a prayer addressed to God, concludes, "The machine replaces / The hand that fastened you / To the cross, but cannot absolve us." The machine can replace humanity because it can perform destructive acts, but it cannot replace God; though it can kill, it cannot forgive, and to forgive is characteristic of the divine. Without absolution, humanity remains bound in its guilt.

Love and poetry are not immune. In "Aubade" (EA), the loved one is ironically "all fly-wheels and pistons; / her smile invisible // as a laser"; later this female machine is portrayed as the tomb of poetry, though, in a rare optimistic note, poetry has risen from the dead. "Postscript" portrays a world in which progress and production make life bitter for poetry: "Was there oil / For the machine? It was / The vinegar in the poets' cup." Language, with its natural rhythms, suffers in such a mechanical world:

> Among the forests
> Of metal the one human
> Sound was the lament of
> The poets for deciduous language.

"Deciduous" is drawn from the organic world of natural rhythms and cycles of renewal; when the forest is metal, there is no place for such things. What kind of poetry would feel at home?

In his reinterpretation of the traditional myth of the Fall, Thomas has produced what Peter Abbs has called "a radical mythology for the twentieth century."[44] One must then ask, how successful is he? Critics generally pronounce his effort a failure, intellectually and poetically. Colin Meir is representative: he calls Thomas's mythology a failure "not only because it is unrealistic to imply that man would be better off in a pre-industrial civilization, but principally because the threat of 'the machine' is never made vividly real."[45] While one can agree that Thomas is sometimes too abstract, poems like "Postscript," "Other," "Earth," "God's Story," and "Fuel," which use personification, concrete detail, and allusion in describing the machine, do make the danger of technology "vividly real," and so Meir's "never" is an overstatement. Also, as mentioned before, the associations that "the machine" has built up carry over from poem to poem, mitigating the bare abstraction of certain poems.

Moreover, it is important in understanding Thomas's broader mythology of God, mankind, and the machine, to realise that Thomas is not as intransigent towards technology as he might appear. Though he is on record as favouring the reversal of the Industrial Revolution, a rather reactionary position, when one examines what he says, one sees that he opposes not so much the machine itself as the use to

which it is put and the values that determine that use: mindless and ever-increasing production, headlong exploitation of finite resources, militarism, and industrialisation, all of which dehumanise people.[46] Thomas speaks up for a human scale, E. Schumacher's philosophy of "small is beautiful," and the worth of the individual: "What matters is the individual in his small world."[47] These are values which contemporary Western society has been rediscovering. Thomas's distrust of technology and his reasons for that distrust are widely shared, and so his mythology does express the concerns of many twentieth-century people.

There is also an ambiguity lurking in Thomas's references in the creation poems to tools and machines that opens the possibility that they need not be evil. These hints are made more specific in poems like "Emerging" and "Scenes" from Laboratories of the Spirit and "Suddenly" from Later Poems, in which machines are enfolded within the divine circle. "Emerging" begins, "Not as in the old days I pray, / God. My life is not what it was./ Yours, too, accepts the presence of the machine?" This acceptance, in a medical context, sees the technology described in terms drawn from the Eucharist and art: "I go now to be doctored, / to drink sinlessly of the blood / of my brother, to lend my flesh / as manuscript of the great poem / of the scalpel." Technology put to proper use is sanctified, acceptable to God and poet.

"Scenes" likens the pulse to "the rhythm / of the machine," recognising a connection between them that seems to animate the machine rather than mechanise the pulse. The poet continues by drawing a parallel, astonishing for him, between the dynamism of the universe and the machine:

> there are moments in
> a Bach fugue when we are at the centre
> of the universe and hear the throb
> of the great dynamo that converts
> music to power.

At the heart of things lies a machine! Thomas is trying to express a musical experience that is also transcendental. Complex music of a very high order gives one passage to the centre of reality, and there one hears the throb of a powerful machine, the beat of the pulse of the universe, a rhythm that, being common to music, machine, and mankind, relates and unites them.

"Suddenly" is Thomas's song of praise for God's sudden breaking of his "long silence." Among the channels through which God addresses the ecstatic poet are the chain-saw, the ambiguous "instruments," and "the machine itself." Divine "volubility" embraces everything in the poet's environment, natural and man-made. The machine is not opposed to God but is a witness to God's purposes. These three poems are medi-

tations, not myths, but they show that Thomas's mind developed the possibilities found in the mythic poems into a more holistic vision that includes the machine as an instrument of God, not necessarily his enemy. Opposites are subsumed into unity.

This study of Thomas's mythic poems, especially the creation poems, reveals both the poet's deep roots in Judaeo-Christian tradition and his original exploitation of that tradition. Thomas keeps the premises of the biblical creation stories and draws especially on the J document for incidents, insights, and details. Though he seldom tries to reproduce biblical rhythms or language, his bare style with its dearth of descriptive detail reflects the "narrative minimalism"[48] of the Hebrew Bible. But Thomas never provides merely verse paraphrases of biblical stories and seldom produces an orthodox poem. Instead he takes a story like Jacob's wrestling match and reverses it in emphasis and outcome. The Fall and the tower of Babel are modernised and reinterpreted, the former in terms of technology, the latter in terms of language and natural theology. J's anthromorphic presentation of God is explored in various ways. God's humanness is emphasised and sometimes interpreted in a Christian way, and his human emotions are exaggerated. Hints of violence or irrationality in the Bible are plucked out and examined in an extreme form. Thomas's highly original reinterpretations and extensions are fresh and provocative: they make one see new possibilities in familiar texts and ideas, and often provide theological insight through the mythic narratives.

Thomas reinterprets and extends his traditional material in the mythic poems in line with three related aims: to explore conceptions of the nature of God in a personal response to the problems of human suffering, to criticise certain popular notions of God, and to present in mythic form an analysis of Western society. In pursuing the third aim, he has produced a mythology that, while marred at times by too much abstraction and an overly-negative attitude towards technology, does express in mythic form certain thoughts and feelings about technology and its effects shared by many others. Thomas thus fulfills his role as traditional poet, reinterpreting the myths for his age. Finally, Thomas's mythology preserves an element of ambiguity in the presentation of technology, allowing for the possibility of its redemption and repossession as an instrument of the divine in a harmonious world.

## Notes

[1] R. S. Thomas, "Abercuawg," R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose, ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: Poetry Wales, 1983) 157.

[2] Timothy Wilson, "R. S. Thomas," The Guardian 15 Sept. 1972: 8; rpt. in Critical Writings on R.S. Thomas, ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: Poetry Wales, 1982) 68.

[3] R. S. Thomas, "R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge," Anglo-Welsh Review 74 (1981): 37.

[4] Rollo May, The Cry for Myth (New York: Norton, 1991) 30-31.

[5] Philip Wheelwright, "Myth," Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms, 1986 ed.

[6] Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harper, 1963) 11.

[7] In arriving at this definition, I have been most influenced by the work of Mircea Eliade, especially Myth and Reality.

[8] Barbara Sproul, Primal Myths: Creating the World (San Fransisco: Harper, 1979) 1-3.

[9] William Noon, Poetry and Prayer (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers UP, 1967) 50.

[10] J and E are named for their word for God (Yahweh--Jahweh in German--and Elohim), D is responsible for Deuteronomy, and P stands for the Priestly school. There is also R, the redactor, who wove together the other four. As a theology student in 1935, Thomas would certainly have known of the four traditions and the different conceptions of God. He would likely have known of James Moffat's popular translation of the Bible, published in Britain in 1922, which italicised all the passages attributed to J (mentioned by David Rosenberg in his translation of J, The Book of J, commentary by Harold Bloom [New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990] 328). Biblical commentaries of the sort a priest would consult and perhaps own, such as The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible, commonly provide lists of passages in Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers belonging to J, P, and E.

[11] The link between Aristotle and the steady state is pointed out by physicist Gerald Schroeder in Genesis and the Big Bang: The Discovery of Harmony Between Modern Science and the Bible (New York: Bantam, 1990) 71.

[12] Brian Morris, "Mr Thomas's Present Concerns," Poetry Wales 14.4 (1979): 37.

[13] Morris 37.

[14] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 40.

[15] Bloom, commentary, The Book of J 14.

[16] Bloom 26.

[17] H. W. F. Saggs notes that "traces of demons, whose behaviour is characterised by irrational malevolence, are recognised even in the Bible, despite the spurious orthodoxy in which pious later editors wrapped them" (Civilization Before Greece and Rome [New Haven: Yale UP, 1989] 288). Saggs points to two incidents in J: Jacob's wrestling match in Gen. 32, in which his opponent is originally a troll who will not allow strangers to cross his river, and whose demonic character is emphasised by his possession of power only at night, and second, the inexplicable attack on Moses by a demon, also at night (Ex. 4:24-6). In both cases the demonic attacker is said to be Yahweh.

[18] J. P. Fokkelson, "Genesis," The Literary Guide to the Bible, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990) 41.

[19] Bloom 215-16; also Saggs 288.

[20] Northrop Frye, The Great Code: The Bible and Literature (Toronto: Academic P Canada, 1982) 6.

[21] Lynn Ross-Bryant, Imagination and the Life of the Spirit: An Introduction to the Study of Religion and Literature (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981) 162.

[22] Nigel Davies, Human Sacrifice in History and Today (New York: William Morrow, 1981) 63.

[23] Davies 62.

[24] Harold Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People (New York: Schocken, 1981) 37, 42-43.

[25] Stephen Jay Gould, an evolutionary biologist, argues that the popular view of Darwinism as a bloodthirsty battle for survival is in fact a misinterpretation of Darwin's "abstract metaphor": "Reproductive success, the criterion of natural selection, works in many modes: victory in battle may be one pathway, but cooperation, symbiosis, and mutual

aid may also secure success in other times and contexts" ("In a Jumbled Drawer," Bully for Brontosaurus [New York: Norton, 1991] 327). However, Gould concedes, Darwin's "actual examples certainly favoured bloody battle" (328), and this became the popular interpretation of Darwin's struggle for existence.

[26] A. E. Dyson, Yeats, Eliot and R. S. Thomas (London: Macmillan, 1981) 314.

[27] Dyson 315.

[28] Bloom 28.

[29] Bloom 177.

[30] More recent scholarship contends that the knowledge should more properly be considered scientia, scientific knowledge, or perhaps "weal and woe . . . the physical well-being or hardship associated with the acquisition of the arts of civilization" (J. M. Evans, Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition [Oxford: Clarendon, 1968] 18).

[31] See Donne's "Hymn to God my God, in my Sicknesse": "We thinke that Paradise and Calvarie, / Christs Crosse, and Adams tree, stood in one place" (Poetical Works, ed. Herbert Grierson [London: Oxford UP, 1933] 337, ll. 21-2. All references to Donne's poems are from this edition). Roger Cook describes the legend which links the wood of the tree of knowledge with that of the cross in The Tree of Life: Symbol of the Centre (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974) 122.

[32] The fresco is pictured in Carl Jung et al., Man and His Symbols (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1964) 80.

[33] Schroeder's book Genesis and the Big Bang: The Discovery of Harmony Between Modern Science and the Bible is an example.

[34] Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1959) 121-22, 125.

[35] Rosenberg translates 11:6: "They conceive this between them, and it leads up until no boundary exists to what they will not touch" (73).

[36] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 40-41.

[37] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 41.

[38] Jeremy Hooker, in a review of H'm (Poetry Wales 7.4 [1972]: 89-93) and Peter Abbs in his review of What is a Welshman? and Selected Poems 1946-68 (Anglo-Welsh Review 24 [1974]: 157-60) are two early critics who commented on the reinterpretation of the Fall in terms of the machine. Thomas reinterprets the Nativity similarly, as one will see in Chapter Four.

[39] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 48.

[40] Andrew Waterman, "Closing the Shutters: Frequencies and the Poetry of R. S. Thomas," Poetry Wales 14.4 (1979): 98.

[41] Anne Price-Owen, "Provoked by Innocence," Planet 73 (1989): 66.

[42] Morris 39.

[43] God searching without success among the cogs and camshafts for mankind, calling "Where are you?" recalls not only the Lord looking for Adam and Eve in Gen. 3 and Thomas's use of the question in other creation poems, but also David Jones's lament "A, a, a, Domine Deus," in which the anguished poet searches fruitlessly for the hidden God among the forms and details of a technological civilisation. Thomas certainly knew Jones's work and would have identified with this poem.

[44] Abbs 159.

[45] Colin Meir, "The Poetry of R. S. Thomas," British Poetry since 1970: A Critical Survey, ed. Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980) 8.

[46] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 42-43. John Barnie understands this point when he writes, "Thomas's attitude to science and technology is sometimes misrepresented as being negative, largely because of a misunderstanding in certain quarters of his use of the machine as a symbol. He is not 'against' developments in science and technology in themselves, but he is against their misuse in a civilization based on greed and self-love" (rev. of Later Poems 1972-1982, by R. S. Thomas, Poetry Wales 18.4 [1983]: 90-91).

[47] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 42.

[48] The term is Robert Alter's, used in his introduction to the Old Testament in The Literary Guide to the Bible 23.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Dichotomies of Belief I

In "created myth," a form usually narrative, Thomas explores certain religious questions in a relatively impersonal, distanced, and fictional mode. Most of his religious verse, however, is comprised of personal lyrics, meditations, prayers, and speculative poems, which chart his spiritual journey as private believer through the varied territory of experience and thought. Thomas possesses no simple faith; the experiences and thoughts reflected in the verse are very complex and often conflicting. One feels at times that Thomas holds opposite experiences, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes in a tension, which is sometimes resolved, sometimes not, both within individual poems and between poems.[1] This accounts for the importance of dichotomy and paradox in his work and for one's sense that one must in general look at the work as a whole, rather than take any individual poem as the final position. Thomas himself implies this in his comparison of his moods to the Welsh weather:

> A lyric poet to me is a person who changes, you don't ever remain the same for long. This is all bound up with living in Wales--you know the Welsh climate changes, and to live in Wales is to be conscious of these changes. That, just when on the darkest of days the clouds will suddenly break and the sun comes through and the whole place is transformed, everything lights up and this has been part and parcel of my approach. So that, realizing how it can be, you write a poem of hope then. And then the next day you're back to this sort of lowering weather, and you then write a pessimistic poem. I don't see contradiction in this because, as I say, there is enough of the pure artist . . . in me to realize that what counts is the poem. As long as the poem is a good poem, I'm rather unrepentant if somebody says "but yesterday you were singing about the beauties of God's creation, and here you are today, carrying on the insolubility of the problem of pain and this sort of thing". One just says, "well I saw the possibility of a poem yesterday when the countryside was all lighted up, I saw something of the glory of God, and today, I see something of the

> dark other side of the mirror that we don't understand, and so I'm expressing that today.[2]

In a letter to D. Z. Phillips, Thomas states that "'All is ambivalence, multivalence even. The same natural background, which, from one standpoint has facilitated my belief in God, has from another raised enormous problems.'" He has been, he says, "'trying to operate on as many levels as possible, mostly failing, being self-contradictory, open to refutation on the charge of inconsistency, but occasionally perhaps setting up overtones.'"[3] The complexity one sees in the poetry, then, is a faithful representation of his spiritual experience, a sign of his respect for the many-sided nature of truth, and a deliberate poetic aim.

The search for God which Thomas conducts in the poems that form the subject of the next two chapters, is a search for knowledge of God's true nature, as in the mythic poems, but it is also a search for experience of God himself. As much as he longs to know "'the true name of God, the word by which he lies bound, the thing in itself behind the appearances,'"[4] Thomas longs, perhaps even more, for a personal encounter with God. Such an encounter he describes in the introduction to his selection of George Herbert's poems as a significant spiritual goal: he stresses "the possibility and the desirability of a friendship with God. Friendship is no longer the right way to describe it. The word now is dialogue, encounter, confrontation; but the realities engaged have not altered that much."[5] In "Message," the bird offers God's "friendship" but "confrontation" is the word Thomas uses in 1972, when he speaks of becoming "obsessed by the possibility of having 'conversations or linguistic confrontations with ultimate reality'"[6] (the tension and even hostility associated with the word may reflect despair at God's elusiveness or anger over God's harshness). So knowledge of God's true nature is inseparable from one's experience of God. As John Macquarrie says, "Talk about God is always at the same time talk about ourselves. We talk of God only in so far as we experience his acting upon us."[7] One knows most deeply what one has made one's own through experience.

Thomas is a poet of dichotomy, and his personal search for knowledge and experience of God can be fruitfully approached in terms of six significant dichotomies present in his work: doubt and faith, absence and presence, silence and speech, the apophatic and cataphatic traditions of mysticism and theology, the <u>deus absconditus</u> and the <u>deus revelatus</u> in Christ, and the personal God and the impersonal God. These dichotomies are traditional but they are worked out in the modern context. The two terms of each dichotomy are opposites, but one often finds that the opposition blurs, that they are intimately related with each other through paradox or as complements.

Because of their close relationship, the first three dichotomies will be divided and their corresponding terms will be considered together in this chapter: doubt, absence, and silence first, then faith, presence, and speech. The last three dichotomies, more theological in nature, will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Doubt, Absence, and Silence

Poems expressing doubt, despair, abandonment, and nothingness form a powerful group among Thomas's religious poetry. Such experiences are, for Thomas, essential parts of religion itself. In the introduction to his anthology of religious poetry, he defines religion as "an experience of ultimate reality" and names "negation" as one element of it, important enough to warrant a section in the anthology entitled "Nothing."[8] Thomas defends such experiences from the anticipated protests of those more orthodox than he:

> Poems such as the 'terrible' sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins are but a human repetition of the cry from the Cross: 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!' The ability to be in hell is a spiritual prerogative, and proclaims the true nature of such a being. Without darkness, in the world we know, the light would go unprized; without evil, goodness would have no meaning."

(In his lecture "Abercuawg," he argues that absence helps one know the nature of what one seeks.[9]) He goes on to posit such experiences as part of the tension that produces poetry, quoting Keats with approval on the poet's ability to exist "'in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'"[10] Religion's bleaker experiences fulfil both a spiritual and a poetic purpose.

Many of Thomas's poems of doubt spring from a concern with suffering, especially its seeming incompatibility with a God of love. This concern, which occurs throughout Thomas's work, is not personal: Thomas rarely focuses on his own private suffering but rather on that of another person, humanity in general, or the creatures. "Pre-Cambrian" (E), for example, ends with the poet staring at the sea and declaring,

> What I need now
> is a faith to enable me to out-stare
> the grinning faces of the inmates of its
> asylum,
> the failed experiments God put away.

"Which" (LS) begins flatly, "And in the book I read: / God is love. But lifting / my head, I do not find it / so."

The title poem of H'm uses ironic allusion to convey the same message in fourteen short lines: that there is a terrible gap between the verbal concepts of religion and human experience of the world. The remarkably inarticulate preacher in this poem clearly equates love and God since, asked to speak about love, he "opened / his mouth and the word God / fell out." He also seems to be aware of the inadequacy of his words in mediating such a God to the starving children he sees, for he refuses to speak of God and falls silent. Instead of words he turns to a gesture of compassion, "reaching his arms out," recalling wordlessly Christ's welcome of the children, "Suffer the little children to come unto me" (Matt. 19:14). But these are not the rosy-cheeked children of the Sunday School pictures; they are the starving children of Biafra, the Sudan, Somalia, whose pictures have seared the modern memory. If Christ himself were to call them, they could not come:

> but the little
> children the ones with
> big bellies and bow
> legs that were like
> a razor shell
> were too weak to come.

They constitute a challenge to the faith of the poet as well as the preacher. Yet it is important to note that the end of the poem is more open than might appear. It leaves the preacher poised with a terrible dilemma, which seems to be the poet's own, but it does not touch the crucial matter of what the preacher does next: either withdraw in despairing impotence or find a way to mediate God's love to the children, for example, by feeding them. Thus there is still a possibility of response.

Unlike Donne, Thomas does not write often of death, whether his own, that of others, or the idea of death. When he does write of mortality, he usually focuses on the suffering associated with it. For example, in a relatively early poem, "Ah!" (P), he writes:

> I would make different
> Provision; for such flesh arrange
> Exits down less fiery paths. But the God
> We worship fashions the world
> From such torment, and every creature
> Decorates it with its tribute of blood.

"Spun seas" (ERS), a late poem, speaks also of the painful deaths that fuel the continuance of life. The poet seems to

accept the fact of death; it is the accompanying suffering that troubles him.

Other poems of doubt express the poet's feelings of personal nothingness. A particularly striking example is "The Porch" (F), mentioned in Chapter One, which seems to represent an actual experience of Thomas since it is mentioned obliquely in the autobiographical The Echoes Return Slow: one of the prose pieces, "'The Child is father of the Man,'" states that "dark thoughts come to the priest in the church porch at night, with the owl calling." The poem is told in the third person and deliberately discounts the identity of the central figure:

> Do you want to know his name?
> It is forgotten. Would you learn
> what he was like? He was like
> anyone else, a man with ears
> and eyes.

Thomas dismisses the modern interest in personality, even his own, as irrelevant. (He called his autobiography Neb, the Welsh word for "nobody.") It is the experience that is important, so important that Thomas carefully sets the stage: "in a church porch on an evening // in winter, the moon rising, the frost / sharp." Further, "The cold came at him; / his breath was carved angularly / as the tombstones; an owl screamed." The sharp sensual details suggest that the poet wants urgently to share this experience, while the emphasis on cold reinforces the metaphysical chill of the vision.

The experience itself is overpowering, a sudden vision that aggressively overcomes the man, seemingly unsought: "he was driven / to his knees and for no reason / he knew." The experience renders him incapable of speech or thought ("He had no power to pray") or of movement (he "kept his place / there for an hour"). The vision is one of personal nothingness embodied in the dark indifferent cosmos: "he looked out on a universe / that was without knowledge / of him." So the vision challenges the message of faith that the individual is important and valuable. It also freezes the man's ability to pray, thus making him feel cut off from God. Spatially the vast, unbounded, inhuman space of the cosmos is set against the small, enclosed, human space of the church behind the man, doubt against faith. The man is held precisely on the boundary between the two, "on that lean / threshold, neither outside nor in"; so the poem ends with an attempt to assert a symbolic balance between faith on the one side and doubt and nothingness on the other, which the power of the experience threatens to upset. As a vision of nothingness, it reverses both the traditional Christian vision that affirms meaning to the recipient and the view of the heavens that sees them as a witness to God's glory.

Thomas also experiences doubts about the validity and continuance of traditional Christianity. In Chapter One I said that "Travellers" implies that the truths of the past, including religious truths, no longer have credit among modern people. "Pre-Cambrian" suggests that a new god may be needed: "After Christ, what? The molecules / are without redemption," while "Poste Restante" (LS) considers the possibility of a slow decline of Christianity or at least of the institutional church. The poet describes a church on a hill with sharp images of decay and neglect. The church is "that place / of darkness, sour with the mould / of the years," which over time gradually "sank to its knees." The chalice has a spider living in it between Sundays and the wine is "unwanted / by all but he," the slightly crazed priest. Such doubts are intimately related to doubts about his vocation as a priest (to be discussed in Chapter Five).

The last group of poems of doubt reflects Thomas's experiences of the silence and absence of God, experiences prominent in his spiritual journey. They haunt the poet and at times bring him close to despair. "In Church" (P) describes such a time. The speaker, presumably Thomas in the context, has remained behind after a service in hopes of finding God in the quiet empty church, the house of God:

> Often I try
> To analyse the quality
> Of its silences. Is this where God hides
> From my searching?

God, however, is not there, and the silence, shadows, and emptiness yield no paradoxical vision. A church is often compared to the human body in Christian tradition, but in this case, the body is dead; the stones "are the hard ribs / Of a body our prayers have failed / To animate." The church is alien to the worshippers and greets their departure with relief: "The uneasiness of the pews / ceases." The air keeps an ancient "vigil" but not, it seems, for the Christian God. In "Parry" (H), the listening believer hears "the God breathe"; in this poem, the speaker hears only his own breathing, not God's. Unlike a similar, earlier poem, "In a Country Church" (SYT), which ends with a rich image of spiritual vision, this poem ends with an image of the struggle of faith and doubt, with the seeker "testing his faith / On emptiness, nailing his questions / One by one to an untenanted cross." The crucifixion imagery suggests that through his questions and doubt, the speaker feels crucified. The action of nailing brings his questions up against the thing that symbolises their answer, but the cross, the suffering God, brings no relief this time. The cross is "untenanted" because it is likely not a crucifix since this is a Protestant church, and because according to Christian belief, Christ rose from the dead, but also perhaps because

God is absent. In the struggle between faith and doubt, the tone of the poem favours doubt in this encounter.

A later poem, "Correspondence" (BHN), also chronicles a sense of failure and despair. The speaker is responding to an absent friend's question as to why he does not write. His answer expresses his frustration and hopelessness. Doggedly he keeps "searching for meaning," for truth, for God, but finds no success. The book of nature yields nothing but "illegible writing / on the shore." Truth lies as far off as ever, so "what is there to say?" The poem ends with the poet's despairing wish that "there were as simple / an explanation for the silence of God." In "Plusperfect," from the same volume, the frustrated seeker awakes from anaesthetic in "the ante-rooms / of the spirit" and finds "my hurt / unmended. Where are you? I / shouted, growing old in / the interval between here and now." God does not answer his cry. Nor does he answer the intrepid wielder of language in "One Way" (BHN), before whom "space gave, time was / eroded," but God remains silent:

> There was one being
> would not reply. God,
> I whispered, refining
> my technique, signalling
> to him on the frequencies
> I commanded. But always
> amid the air's garrulousness
> there was the one station
> that remained closed.

The image of the closed station seems to carry a deadening finality, although the poem goes on to report without comment an alternative, nonverbal way of calling God.

The silence and absence of God are common experiences in the modern West, particularly given the horrors that this century has seen. For many, divine absence and silence have led to a loss of faith, to agnosticism or atheism, or even to the dismissive existentialist defiance expressed by the nineteenth-century French romantic poet Alfred de Vigny at the conclusion of "Le Mont des Oliviers":

> Muet, aveugle et sourd au cri des créatures,
> Si le Ciel nou laissa comme un monde avorté,
> Le juste opposera le dédain à l'absence
> Et ne répondra plus que par un froid silence
> Au silence éternal de la Divinité."

God may exist but his absence and silence condemn him and make him irrelevant. French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet could be describing Thomas's darkest experiences when he writes of this experience of silence:

> I call. No one answers me. Instead of concluding that there is no one there--which could be an observation, pure and simple, dated and placed, in space and time--I decide to act as if someone were in fact there, and as if, for one reason or another, he were refusing to answer. From then on, the silence that follows my appeal is no longer a real silence, it has become pregnant with content, with depth, with a soul--which immediately plunges me back into my own soul. The distance between my cry, as I hear it, and the mute (perhaps deaf) interlocutor to whom it is addressed becomes a sort of anguish, my hope and despair, a sense to my life. Henceforth, nothing will count for me save this false vacuum and the problems it causes me.

Robbe-Grillet's attitude to the experience is clear, especially when he continues, "I very soon realise that no one is going to answer, but the invisible presence that I continue to create by my cry forces me to go on, for all eternity sending out my cry into the silence."[12] Robbe-Grillet's framework is atheism; God is a human creation and the anguished experience of God's silence is also self-created, from a failure to realise that God does not really exist. There are no experiences of God's presence or communication. The silence is absolute and without any affirming spiritual meaning.

## Faith, Presence, and Speech

Contrary to doubt, absence, and silence in the first three dichotomies are faith, presence, and speech. Thomas is not tempted by atheism, only by doubts about the nature of the God he pursues with such passion and persistence.[13] States of doubt and despair comprise only one of the weathers of the soul in Thomas's verse; they are countered by states of faith, joy, and hope. Similarly, Thomas's experiences of God's silence and absence are not placed within an atheistic framework, like Robbe-Grillet's, but within a Christian framework that includes them as part of authentic Christian experience. Absence and silence are reinterpreted according to Christian tradition and presence arrives by grace.

In one sense faith and doubt are opposites, but they are not mutually exclusive. In Christian tradition, faith is understood to include some measure of doubt. "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief," cried the anguished father in Mark 9: 24. Theologian Paul Tillich declared in a sermon, "I am convinced that the element of doubt, conquered in faith, is never completely lacking in any serious affirma-

tion of God."[14] In an essay on Pascal's Pensées, published in 1931, T. S. Eliot wrote of the scepticism "which leads to faith and which is somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it," adding that "the demon of doubt . . . is inseparable from the spirit of belief."[15] Thomas himself agrees: "there's no disgrace in having doubts, doubts are part of the Christian ethos. . . . You don't get anywhere by pretending they don't exist."[16] Doubt is unavoidable, a function of limited human understanding: "I'm not repentant even about my poems of doubt and so on, because they're simply the whimpering of a child--his own feeble little attempt at comprehension of something which is not comprehensible."[17] Thomas's poems of doubt are to be considered in relation to his poems of faith; they are not meant to be a final position.

The relation between faith and doubt is shifting. In some poems, doubt dominates faith: "Moorland" (EA), for example, compares the poet's faith to the appearances of a harrier, which is "here a moment, then / not here, like my belief in God." At other times, faith and doubt seem evenly opposed, as in the image of the poet on "that lean / threshold, neither outside nor in" from "The Porch," or they are possibilities between which the poet is poised, as in the concluding image of "Waiting" (F), which describes the speaker

> Leaning far out
> over an immense depth, letting
> your name go and waiting,
> somewhere between faith and doubt,
> for the echoes of its arrival.

In still other poems, faith embraces doubt and reinterprets what seemed bleak. The first part of "The Moon in Lleyn" (LS) borrows Yeats's scheme of the phases of the moon and the cycles of history and religion to postulate the end of Christianity:

> The last quarter of the moon
> of Jesus gives way
> to the dark.
> . . . . . .
> Just as though
> choirs had not sung, shells
> have swallowed them; the tide laps
> at the Bible; the bell fetches
> no people to the brittle miracle
> of the bread. The sand is waiting
> for the running back of the grains
> in the wall into its blond
> glass. Religion is over, and

what will emerge from the body
of the new moon, no one can say.

The second part rejects this conclusion and its implications for the believer. Religion runs deep: "These very seas / are baptized." The poet finally sees hope and the possibility of spiritual renewal because

people
are becoming pilgrims
again, if not to this place,
then to the recreation of it
in their own spirits.

What is required of him is faithfulness: "You must remain / kneeling." Faith reasserts itself against the doubt that threatens and assaults it.

The elements of risk and trust involved in faith are well-expressed in two late poems, "Threshold" (BHN) and "Coming" (EA). "Threshold," mentioned in Chapter One, presents the speaker at a point of decision, poised between the Platonic "mind's cave" and "the worse / darkness outside, where things pass and / the Lord is in none of them," that is, between inner and outer realities. Pondering where to go, he finally decides on a version of Kierkegaard's leap of faith:

What

to do but, like Michelangelo's
Adam, put my hand
out into unknown space,
hoping for the reciprocating touch?

One cannot know until one risks the attempt, and faith is taking that risk in trust. "Coming" describes the coming of God into the world in a series of metaphors, the last of which is

an impression

of eyes, quicker than
to be caught looking, but taken
on trust like flowers in the
dark country towards which we go.

Darkness represents mystery, the unknown; existence after death is thus a "dark country." As in "Waiting" (BHN), in which the speaker waits "for one flower to open / on the mind's tree of thorns," the flowers suggest an experience of God's presence and goodness, a spiritual blessing which evokes wonder. "Flowers in the dark country," which cannot

be seen, symbolically express the poet's faith and trust that after death God and his goodness will still be present to him.

Thomas's faith is complex and tenacious, and comprises a stubborn clinging to hope when all seems bleak, a tentativeness, an openness to possibilities as opposed to rigid orthodoxy, and a vigilance for the small signs of God, as well as joyous affirmation, assurance, and mystical apprehension. The poet's honest recognition of the close relation of doubt and faith and his awareness of audience lead at times to a tact of statement, allowing for doubt or despair as it delicately expresses hope and fulfilment. One example occurs in a relatively early poem, "The Belfry" (P). In a vivid extended metaphor, the poem compares the belfry and the believer and works the comparison out meteorologically through two contrasting weathers of the soul. In the first stanza, the belfry stands grim and frozen, "as though no sunlight / Could ever thaw out the music / Of its great bell." The wintry cold, which seems irremediable (although "as though" subtly questions such pessimism), represents a state of spiritual desolation, those terrible times "when a black frost is upon / One's whole being, and the heart / In its bone belfry hangs and is dumb." The second stanza delicately suggests the possibility of renewal, if the believer remains faithful in prayer. Then the prayers, which "fall steadily through the hard spell / Of weather" between God and the believer, may "perhaps" be "warm rain" that brings spring and life: the sun, flowers, and "throbbing of bells." The tentativeness of "perhaps" allows for doubt, but the sensuous details, made more vivid and appealing by contrast with the earlier black frost, work in a contrary way and make the merely possible seem certain.

Another example occurs at the end of a very late poem, "Bleak Liturgies"[18]--it is characteristic of Thomas to put such resonating images or thoughts at the end of a poem. This long poem assessing the state of religion today concludes with the seekers after God "challenging him to come forth" and then finding, "as the day dawned, / his body hanging upon the crossed tree / of man, as though he were man, too." "As though" requires a verb in the subjunctive mood, used to describe "an action or a state as conceived (and not as a fact) and therefore used to express a wish, command, exhortation, or a contingent, hypothetical, or prospective event" (OED). The last two lines of the poem thus preserve the element of doubt in faith. Grammatically, "as though he were man, too" implies "but he is not," while the "body hanging on the crossed tree / of man" clearly draws on traditional symbols and beliefs about Christ to imply "but he is."[19] These and other poems show how subtly Thomas can suggest the interplay of faith and doubt or desolation and the encompassing of the latter by the former.

Like the feelings of doubt, despair or desolation, to which they are, of course, closely related, experiences of God's silence and absence are common in Judaeo-Christian religious experience. They seem a natural part of the weathers of the soul, of spiritual search and intense focus on relationship with God. Several of the Psalms begin with a cry protesting God's seeming absence and silence:

> Why standest thou afar off, O Lord? Why hidest thou thyself in times of trouble? (Psalm 10)
>
> How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me? (Psalm 13)
>
> Unto thee will I cry, O Lord my rock; be not silent to me: lest if thou be silent to me, I become like them that go down into the pit. (Psalm 28)

Christ himself felt the absence of God at his death and expressed his sense of abandonment in the words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The psalm continues, "why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent." The ninth-century Irish mystic and theologian, Johannes Scotus Erigena, exclaimed, "'The loss and absence of God is the torment of the whole creation; nor do I think that there is any other,'"[20] and mystics like Erigena who followed the path of darkness and negation could expect, in St. John of the Cross's analysis of contemplative life, a Dark Night of the Soul, in which God withdrew and one experienced his absence and silence with feelings of desolation, spiritual dryness, and despair. The poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins describes such despair at God's seeming absence when he writes, "my lament / Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! away."[21]

Some modern theologians recognise the absence of God as the norm of present-day spiritual experience. Jewish theologian Martin Buber says of God, "'He is, but he is not present,'"[22] while Paul Tillich, in a sermon entitled "Spiritual Presence," sees God's withdrawal as his deliberate and caring response to a shallow, comfortable view of the divinity.[23] In his experiences of God's absence and silence, Thomas is not unique; he can and does find contexts for them within his religious tradition.

Thomas's poems of absence and silence fall into two groups: those in which the experience is unrelieved and desolate, discussed above, and those in which the experience is paradoxical, and absence and silence are sometimes trans-

formed into their opposites. In the paradoxical poems about absence, absence is seen as presence in part because of the necessary relation between them. As Thomas says in his lecture "Abercuawg," "we can never become conscious of absence as such, only that what we are seeking is not present." An experience of absence is "a way to come to know better, through its absence, the nature of the place we seek."[24] One can see this process unfolding in the beautiful "Sea-Watching" (LS). This deceptively simple poem will be discussed more fully later, but one of its themes is the development of a sense of presence from absence. The speaker is watching a grey expanse of waters, waiting for the appearance of a rare bird. His watch seems doomed to be unrewarded, "for it is when one is not looking, / at times one is not there / that it comes." Yet he remains faithful and open to the possibility of the bird's appearance and in that disciplined state of focused concentration, he is receptive to paradoxical perception:

> There were days
> so beautiful the emptiness
> it might have filled,
>
> its absence
> was as its presence.

The poet makes clear that waiting for the bird is also, on another level, waiting for God. The poem presents an abstract concept delicately realised in experience, in such a way that one can share what the experience, in all its significance, might be like.

In "Adjustments" (F), God remains absent, but the poem focuses not on the absence but on the many small signs of his activity in the world and so of his having been present, though never perceived. God is "an unseen / power, whose sphere is the cell / and the electron," and at that level he makes numerous "small adjustments" in the fabric of the universe. His activity becomes a model for prayer. In "Suddenly" (LS), God is both absent and immediately present to the speaker. His presence is experienced with intense joy and wonder as a mystical union with the risen Christ. That the encounter occurs "suddenly," quietly, and "unannounced" emphasises that it comes by grace, as a gift given. The experience is marked by an overwhelming sense of divine presence and plenitude:

> I looked
> at him, not with the eye
> only, but with the whole
> of my being, overflowing with
> him as a chalice would
> with the sea.

That the whole self becomes an eye to gaze at Christ in love stresses the spiritual and mystical nature of the experience. The Eucharistic simile is particularly appropriate given the identity of "him." This overwhelming presence seems too real to be associated with its opposite, but the experience of presence in the poem also comprises absence. The poet marvels "Yet was he / no more there than before" and wonders at the mystery of it. The poem conveys the sense that Christ is both there and not there.

In a few of these poems, the speaker's sense of presence bound with absence is not enough to assuage his yearning for encounter with God. "The Absence" (F), for example, begins,

> It is this great absence
> that is like a presence, that compels
> me to address it without hope
> of a reply.

The sense of presence is too marginal and unfulfilling. The metaphors of the room that someone has just left or is about to enter indicate the speaker's familiarity with absence as presence, but also his frustration at missing a more palpable experience of presence. (Later, in "Cadenza" (LP), Thomas will ask if absence is enough.) The speaker wants an unparadoxical presence and tries various resources of language without success: "he is no more here / than before." He is left with only his intense need for God, "the emptiness without him of my whole / being, a vacuum he may not abhor." Ironically, it is just this need that, the last line with its brilliant scientific metaphor implies, will draw God to him irresistibly.

In speaking of absence as presence, as in the creation myths and in his religious poetry since 1970 generally, Thomas sometimes uses abstract language, for example, "that great absence / that is like a presence." He has been criticised for such abstraction, especially by Andrew Waterman, who, in a review of Frequencies, speaks scathingly of "emotionally inert" abstractions in Thomas's later work and of poetry that "only vestigially realises its [the world's] particulars as felt experience." The absence of God as presence is, he declares, "thin fare for poetry."[25] William Bedford, also reviewing Frequencies, similarly criticises Thomas's poetry of the 1970s for failing to make the experience of God felt; its poems merely present "an intellectual puzzle" instead of "felt mystery."[26]

To criticise the use of abstract language in poetry for expression and discussion of abstract concepts seems unnecessarily limiting. Surely poetry may convey thought in the language of thought, and not just felt experience. Intellectual puzzles can be enormously stimulating to some readers. Thomas also employs resources other than abstract language

to express abstract concepts. In the poems of absence as presence, he uses analogies from ordinary life and sensory impressions. The experience of absence as presence is likened in "The Absence" to entering a room "from which someone has just / gone, the vestibule for the arrival / of one who has not yet come." The metaphors draw on the human experience that the emptiness of a room can sometimes be tinged with contrary impressions. "Sea-Watching" draws a parallel, implicit throughout and made explicit at the end, between watching the sea for the appearance of a rare bird, an activity described with vivid sensory details, and watching in prayer for an experience of God. Sensory metaphors include "the echoes / We follow, the footprints he has just / Left" in "Via Negativa" and "the place where you [God] lay / warm" in "Alive," which is otherwise a poem of presence. (The reference seems to be to a hare's form which Thomas discovered and, touching it, found it still warm.[27]) In an astute analysis of "Via Negativa," J.D. Vicary also points out its dramatic setting (it is part of a conversation) and development, its movement towards the personal in "echoes" and "footprints," and its reference to a public domain through the allusion to the wound in Christ's side, as ways in which the poem moves away from the abstraction of its beginning.[28] Thomas's analogies and metaphors succeed in rooting an abstract, paradoxical concept in ordinary and sensory experience. In such cases, absence as presence is hardly "thin fare for poetry."

In the paradoxical poems about silence, Thomas is strengthened by a traditional belief in the spiritual value of silence, which becomes more than an antonym for speech or the absence of sound, but rather a profound and affirming, almost palpable thing in itself. Thomas could find an affirmative, paradoxical view of silence in such diverse figures as the French Catholic devotional writer Francis de Sales ("Love speaks not only by the tongue. . . . Silence and dumbness are words for it"[29]) and Kierkegaard, who writes in a prayer: "Bless then this silence as Thy word to man; grant that he never forgets that Thou speakest also when Thou art silent."[30]

For Thomas, it is in the silence of nature that God makes himself known ("The Moor"), in the silence of the empty church that he grants the vision ("In a Country Church"). In silence one waits for the God to speak ("Kneeling" [NBF]) and in silence one prays ("Not without a struggle" [ERS])--and the prayer too is silence ("Revision" [EA]). God speaks in silence, which "The New Mariner" (BHN) rather prosily calls "his chosen medium of communication." "Nuclear" (WI) vehemently denies that God is mute and pronounces his silence "eloquent." This poem also contains one of only two references in Thomas's poetry to Christ as the word of God, as the poet asks, "What word [is] so explosive

/ as that one Palestinian word with the endlessness of its fall-out?"

In other poems, a paradoxical silence is still problematic. "Shadows" (F) employs darkness and silence as paradoxical signs of a God it is dangerous to be near. The darkness is the uncomfortable shadow of God: "The darkness implies your presence, / the shadow of your steep mind / on my world. I shiver in it." The darkness is paradoxical because it possesses a "splendour" that is blinding to humanity, and a blinding splendour is associated with light, not darkness. Because of his discomfort, the speaker turns from sight to hearing, but feels no safer:

> And so I listen
> instead and hear the language
> of silence, the sentence
> without an end. Is it I, then,
> who am being addressed? A God's words
> are for their own sake; we hear
> at our peril. Many of us have gone
> mad in the mastering of your medium.

Despite the ambiguity caused by the reference to "words," the passage implies that the "medium" includes silence. The pun on "sentence," the impersonality and self-contained nature of God's language, and the reference to insanity in the alliterative last sentence create uneasiness. To hear God's language, even more to become fluent in it, is dangerous and the poet turns for comfort to the warmer shadow of the Cross.

Last are those poems in which Thomas writes with joy and confidence of experiences of God's presence and communication with his people, including the poet. Such poems of faith can be found from Stones of the Field to The Echoes Return Slow and must be given their weight in any measure of the religious verse. In some of these affirmative poems, the encounter with God comes in a church. An early poem, "In a Country Church," describes such a moment of vision, which comes as a gift of grace to one who "kneeled long" in patient attentiveness and receptivity. The setting appears inauspicious at first: the kneeling figure receives "no word" from above, "the grave saints" are dead, "rigid in glass," and "the dry whisper of unseen wings" is made by "bats not angels." The silence seems a potential obstacle to revelation ("was he balked by silence?"), not a condition for it. Yet the figure's faithfulness and patience are rewarded with a vision of the nature of God: he "saw love in a dark crown / Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree / Golden with fruit of a man's body." The vision is a richly symbolic transfiguration of the cross, the object that is found at the front of most churches and at which the figure is probably gazing. The symbols are traditional, but the poet gives

them a freshness and vividness. Christ's crucified body is transfigured as love ablaze. The cross with its human burden is transformed into a tree with golden fruit, a figure that joins the Hesperides' tree with the golden apples, from classical myth, with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil from Genesis 2-3. In Christian legend, as one saw in the last chapter, the cross is said to have been fashioned from its wood and to have been set up on its very spot. The poet presents Christ, not as the new Adam, as St. Paul does, but as the new fruit on the tree, a figure that, according to J. A. W. Bennett, is traditional.[31] Just as eating the first fruit brought the fall and separation from God, so eating the second, in the Eucharist, brings renewed communion with God. The unnatural or paradoxical is again present in that the bare, dormant winter tree is adorned with the improbable and wondrous golden fruit, the transfigured body. The juxtaposition in the poem between the inauspicious setting of the first six lines and the sudden blazing vision of the last three expresses revelation and the sudden eruption of the divine as love into human life.

Subtler and less unexpected is the encounter described in a later poem, "Llananno" (LS). The quiet, empty church beside the river provides a tranquil and timeless setting in which to come "face to face / with no intermediary / between me and God." This encounter is in some sense a direct encounter with God but with a strangely impersonal God, a "presence." The presence, always to be found in the church, is numinous, giving, and gentle:

> I keep my eyes
> open and am not dazzled,
> so delicately does the light enter
> my soul from the serene presence
> that waits for me till I come next.

The muted delicate light, which does not "dazzle" the eye, suggests a God who is not overpowering but deliberately gentle in approach. The light entering the soul suggests a kind of mystic communion with what Thomas and others from St. Augustine on call "ultimate reality." Since the church exists as an oasis apart from but near "the speeding / traffic," the poem expresses in other terms Wordsworth's "central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation" from "The Excursion," a phrase Thomas uses more than once in his writing.

More frequently, Thomas encounters God in and through nature. Thomas is well aware of the ambiguity of nature as a revelation of God: one has seen how its cruelty and violent deaths trouble him. Yet it remains true for Thomas that he meets God and hears the voice of God in and through the natural world. He is, in his own words, "a nature mystic."[32] Nature is often described as a church, for Thomas finds the

same silence and solitude in both. In The Echoes Return Slow, for example, he writes that "The woods were holier than a cathedral" (26); they have "stained / windows" (27) and "green turnings, unecclesiastical aisles" (58). "The Moor" (P) opens: "It was like a church to me" and describes a silent experience of the presence of God conveyed through subtle natural phenomena:

> What God was there made himself felt,
> Not listened to, in clean colours
> That brought a moistening of the eye,
> In movement of the wind over grass.

The speaker's response to God's overture is a humble, inner stillness of mind and heart, an emptying oneself of thought and emotion. This self-emptying or kenosis creates a state of spiritual receptivity and the speaker is rewarded. The poem closes with a rich eucharistic image of blessing: "I walked on, / Simple and poor, while the air crumbled / And broke on me generously as bread." The air, paradoxically substantial, is sacramental and conveys the goodness of creation and of the self-giving God who comes to him.

God's immanence in the natural world is also celebrated in poems like "Alive" (LS), "Suddenly" (LP), and "Praise" (WI), in which God reveals himself in and through his creation. His presence so fills it that Thomas, describing his Wordsworthian feelings of a presence in nature, says that he has come to believe "it is God really."[33] To attend to nature is to meet the presence of God and to hear his voice. "Alive" begins, "It is alive. It is you, / God," and rejoices, rather conventionally, that

> There
> is nothing too ample
> for you to overflow, nothing
> so small that your workmanship
> is not revealed. I listen
> and it is you speaking.

An overwhelming sense of immanence and magnitude is expressed in two unconventional concluding images of elemental states of absence or negation (darkness and silence), which are in fact signs of presence. When the poet wakes at night,

> the darkness
> is the deepening shadow
> of your presence; the silence a
> process in the metabolism
> of the being of love.

This poem, in which the poet can say, "Looking out I can

see / no death," is clearly the complement of those poems like "Ah!" in which he can see nothing but death.

"Suddenly" concentrates on God's speech and "in a second Pentecost" hears a "voluble" God addressing the speaker "suddenly, after long silence" in the objects and processes of the natural and human worlds: water, green leaves, rock, weather, chain-saws, and surgery. The poet strains just a little--one has difficultly believing that this poet hears God "sing to me in the chain-saw"--but the concluding lines present a vision of unity and inclusiveness that obviously appeals to Thomas. All things, "weeds, stones, instruments, / the machine itself," if one attends to them, speak "in the vernacular / of the purposes of One who is." The world is replete with meaning, if one has ears to hear.

"Praise" is a doxological prayer, praising God as artist: musician, sculptor, poet. His materials are the things of nature, such as water, light, shadow, and leaves, and the poem concentrates on his creative activity with them. All nature is an ongoing performance, a supreme continuing work of art and beauty, and the mood of the poem is joy and wonder before it. Such a theme is not new: Thomas himself uses the metaphor of nature as God's artistic creation earlier in "The View from the Window" (PS). However, the poem ends on a more complex, untraditional note with a recognition of the relationship between God and what human beings would call the dark side of nature. God uses "the simplicity / of a flower" to answer the most complex prayer, but he also uses "the rioting / viruses," cause of disease and death, to challenge humanity "when we would domesticate you / to our uses." Such dark phenomena warn one against a too comfortable, simple, and safe concept of the dangerous God. In this poem and others, Thomas interprets God's troubling association with the harshness of nature as a sign that he is other, incomprehensible, and dangerous.

In his expression of the relationship between the cosmos and God, Thomas sometimes treats them as separate entities, as in "Praise," and sometimes, especially in his later work, envisions a panentheistic identification between them, so that, in "Night after night" (ERS), for example, God's "breathing / is the rising and falling of oceans on remote / stars." In "Unity," a lecture given in 1985, Thomas speaks of the earth as a living organism, "an extension of God himself."[34] The idea of God filling the universe that is a part of him accompanies Thomas's increasing sense of the impersonal God, to be discussed in the next chapter.

Finally there are the poems that celebrate God's presence through his great generosity. "The Moor" alludes to God's giving indirectly in the image of the crumbling air, but "The Gift" (EA) and "The Flower" (LS) speak more directly of God's gifts, asked for and received in abundance. Both are also mystical poems in different traditions, the first

the mysticism of light, the second the mysticism of darkness. (These traditions are discussed in the next chapter.) "The Gift" is a luminous and simple poem describing an inner experience of divine presence and plenitude, received as a gift:

> You gave me
>
> only this small pool
> that the more I drink
> from, the more overflows
> me with sourceless light.

The gift is small but its effects are enormous and inexhaustible: a mystical and joyful union with God, symbolised by the sourceless light. The poem is brief and reticent about the experience, but the traditional symbols of water and light and the simple language (mostly words of one syllable) succeed in conveying a sense of what such an ineffable experience might be.

"The Flower" also describes a mystical experience of divine presence and additionally a consciousness of the existence of eternity all around one. The poem begins with a divine gift, not a small pool this time but the whole world:

> I asked for riches.
> You gave me the earth, the sea,
> the immensity
> of the broad sky.

The poem then moves into the realm of religious paradox and the traditional path of mystical negation as the speaker

> learned I must withdraw
> to possess them. I gave my eyes
> and my ears, and dwelt
> in a soundless darkness
> in the shadow
> of your regard.

The speaker empties himself of sense impressions and enters the darkness of "unknowing" in which God can be encountered. As his spiritual life and knowledge of God deepen, the speaker becomes a teacher for others, his subject "the unseen flower by which I sat." This flower symbolises the realm of "eternal ultimate reality" (Thomas's phrase[35]) in which it grows, a realm that touches that of time at the point where the speaker sits. Thomas believes that this reality lies all around one,

> that eternity is not something over there, not something in the future; it is close to us, it is all

> around us and at any given moment one can pass into it; but there is something about our mortality, the fact that we are time-bound creatures, that makes it somehow difficult if not impossible to dwell, whilst we are in the flesh, to dwell permanently in that, in what I would call the Kingdom of Heaven. But that it is close and that we get these overtones, that we get these glimpses of it, is certainly my most deeply held conviction.[36]

The flower is described by negation to hint at its otherness: it is "unseen," its "roots were not / in the soil, nor its petals the colour / of the wide sea," though the last phrase curiously persists in giving a sense of the flower's colour, despite the negative. The flower's otherness extends to its world; it is "its own species with its own / sky over it, shot / with the rainbow of your coming and going." Sitting beside the flower, the speaker is very near God. The rainbow, traditional Judaeo-Christian sign of the covenant in which God promises never again to destroy all life on earth, suggests the benevolence of God's coming and going.

One might note that Thomas stresses the subtlety of God's appearances in the world and vividly expresses this subtlety through analogies and metaphors drawn from human life and nature. In "Suddenly," the quiet appearance of God is described in two analogies from intellectual life: "So truth must appear / to the thinker; so, at a stage / of the experiment, the answer must quietly emerge." Sometimes, of course, "truth" is arrived at as the result of the rigorous application of logic and mathematics, but Thomas expresses an alternative experience in which the answer that one is seeking seems just to come. "The Presence" (BHN) describes its subject as appearing so quietly that it is "present . . . / before I perceive it, sunlight quivering / on a bare wall." The play of light uses a dynamic form of a traditional Christian image for a very untraditional picture of God. Thomas also uses a subtle movement of light to express the presence of God in "Ystrad Fflur" (EA), in which, when God's "mossed voice" speaks, "the light twitched, / as though at the blinking / of an immense eyelid. . . ." "Coming" and "Adjustments" (F) both use the scientific analogy of mutation to describe God's quiet appearances and activity. In addition, "Coming" employs a synesthetic metaphor and one drawn from sight when it describes the coming of God as

> an echo of what the light
> said, when nobody
> attended; an impression
>
> of eyes quicker than
> to be caught looking. . . .

Both descriptions place God in the elusive, mysterious area at the edges of perception. Thomas excels at describing the insubstantial, the mysterious, the subtle signs of God's presence.

I have emphasised Thomas's poems of faith and presence because I wish to counter the impression given by some critics that Thomas is a poet only of pessimism and doubt. Vicary describes Thomas's religious poetry as "largely concerned with states of doubt, loss, abandonment, absence."[37] Vimala Herman describes religious experience in the poetry up to 1978 as negative in tone, ambivalent and enigmatic,[38] I. R. F. Gordon sees little joy and predominant darkness in Thomas's work since 1968,[39] and H. D. Lewis calls the later poetry "one long cry of dereliction."[40] Such judgements seem partial, ignoring the weight of poems appearing throughout Thomas's work, including the poems since 1968, which describe experiences of presence including mystical apprehension, express faith, joy or hope, and make statements concerning knowledge of God. I do not wish to go to the opposite extreme and argue that Thomas is a sunny poet of faith and hope. Certainly he writes most keenly of pain, doubt, despair, and alienation, all challenges to faith that he faces with courage and integrity. Indeed it is vital for Thomas's value as a religious poet for the twentieth century that he does face these challenges, for not only do they strengthen the faith that meets them and provide what he sees as a necessary epistemological contrast, but they also provide a point of contact with his unbelieving audience, many of whom share these feelings. They thus provide a sort of credibility and respect to the poet, who can then go on to speak of faith and belief because such affirmations as he makes are hard-won. I simply wish to emphasise that the poet also writes of joy, a quiet assurance, the presence and love of God, divine goodness, generosity, and plenitude, and he does so more often than has been recognised. He is truly a poet of dichotomy and both sides of his dichotomies must be acknowledged.

## Notes

[1] Other critics who have noticed this feature of Thomas's verse include Moelwyn Merchant, R. S. Thomas (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1979) 9, 54; and M. A. Tatham, "The Long Dialectic of Rain and Sunlight," New Blackfriars 58 (1977): 273.

[2] R. S. Thomas, "R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge," The Anglo-Welsh Review 74 (1983): 39.

[3] R. S. Thomas, quoted in D. Z. Phillips, R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God (London: Macmillan, 1986) ix.

[4] R. S. Thomas, "Ted Hughes and R. S. Thomas Read and Discuss Selections of Their Own Poems," quoted in Tony Brown, "Language, Poetry and Silence: Some Themes in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas," The Welsh Connection: Essays by Past and Present Members of the Department of English Language and Literature, ed. William Tydeman (LLandysul: Gomer, 1986) 172.

[5] R. S. Thomas, introduction, A Choice of George Herbert's Verse (London: Faber, 1967) 16.

[6] R. S. Thomas, quoted in John Mole, "Signals from the Periphery," TLS 2 June 1978: 608.

[7] John Macquarrie, "Existentialism and Christian Thought," Philosophical Resources for Christian Thought, ed. P. LeFevre (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 135.

[8] R. S. Thomas, introduction, Penguin Anthology of Religious Verse (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963) 9.

[9] R. S. Thomas, "Abercuawg," R.S. Thomas: Selected Prose, ed. S. Anstey (Bridgend: Poetry Wales, 1983) 164. This argument goes back at least to Irenaeus, the second century Patristic author, who wrote concerning the Fall in Adversus Haereses, "'For how could men have had a training for good, without knowing what is contrary thereto?'" (John Bowker, Problems of Suffering in the Religions of the World [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970] 86). Besides good and evil, Irenaeus uses the examples of bitter and sweet, and black and white.

[10] Thomas, introduction, Religious Verse 11.

[11] Alfred de Vigny, "Le Mont des Oliviers," The Penguin Book of French Verse, ed. Anthony Hartley, vol. 3 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957) 48, ll. 143-49. Hartley gives the following prose translation: "if Heaven, dumb, blind, and

deaf to the creatures' cry, left us like an aborted world, the just man will oppose absence with disdain and will only reply by cold silence to the eternal silence of the Deity."

[12] Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Nature, Humanism, Tragedy," For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove, 1965) 60.

[13] As Leslie Norris writes, "it is a curious doubt that exists in his mind. He is never without faith in the existence of God, but doubts only what the nature of God might be" (rev. of Frequencies, by R. S. Thomas, Anglo-Welsh Review 28 [1978]: 131).

[14] Paul Tillich, "The Divine Name," The Eternal Now (New York: Scribner's, 1963) 97.

[15] T. S. Eliot, "The Pensées of Pascal," Selected Essays, 3rd ed. (London: Faber, 1951) 411.

[16] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 38.

[17] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 39.

[18] R. S. Thomas, "Bleak Liturgies," Planet 80 (1990): 23-27.

[19] Thomas's use of "as though," which is characteristic of him, reminds one of Donne's use of the equivalent "as if" in the last two lines of Holy Sonnet VII ("At the round earths imagin'd corners"): "Teach me how to repent; for that's as good / As if thou'hadst seal'd my pardon, with thy blood" (296, ll. 13-14).

[20] Johannes Scotus Erigena, quoted in Evelyn Underhill, The Mystery of Sacrifice (London: Longmans, Green, 1938) 44.

[21] G. M. Hopkins, "I wake and feel the fell of dark," The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, 4th ed., ed. W.H. Gardner and N. MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967) 101, ll. 6-8. All further references to Hopkins' poems are from this edition.

[22] Martin Buber, quoted in Ralph Harper, "The Dark Night of Sisyphus," in The Climate of Faith in Modern Literature, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (New York: Seabury, 1964) 77.

[23] Tillich, "Spiritual Presence," The Eternal Now 88.

[24] Thomas, "Abercuawg" 164.

[25] Andrew Waterman, "Closing the Shutters: Frequencies and the Poetry of R.S. Thomas," Poetry Wales 14.4 (1979): 91, 98, 100.

[26] William Bedford, "R. S. Thomas: Frequencies," Agenda 17.2 (1979): 95.

[27] The incident, which Thomas described on a Radio 4 broadcast, is reported in Gillian Clarke, rev. of Between Here and Now, by R. S. Thomas, Anglo-Welsh Review 71 (1982): 81.

[28] J. D. Vicary, "Via Negativa: Absence and Presence in the Recent Poetry of R.S. Thomas," Critical Quarterly 27.3 (1985): 49-50.

[29] Francis de Sale, quoted in William Noon, Poetry and Prayer (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1967) 58.

[30] Søren Kierkegaard, The Prayers of Kierkegaard, ed. P. LeFevre (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1956) 76.

[31] J. A. W. Bennett, The Poetry of the Passion: Studies in Twelve Centuries of English Verse (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) 158.

[32] R. S. Thomas, "R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet," by John Ormond, Poetry Wales 7.4 (1972): 51.

[33] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 47.

[34] R. S. Thomas, "Unity," Planet 70 (1988): 38.

[35] Thomas, "Priest and Poet" 55.

[36] Thomas, "Priest and Poet" 56.

[37] Vicary 42.

[38] V. Herman, "Negativity and Language in the Religious Poetry of R.S. Thomas," ELH 45 (1978): 711.

[39] I. R. F. Gordon, "'The Adult Geometry of the Mind': The Recent Poetry of R. S. Thomas," The Little Review 13/14 (1980): 13.

[40] H. D. Lewis, "The Later Poetry of R. S. Thomas," Poetry Wales 14.4 (1979): 26.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Dichotomies of Belief II

### The Apophatic Tradition and the Via Negativa

Thomas's understanding of God and of the way to God shows at times a clear influence of apophatic mysticism and theology with its via negativa. At the heart of this tradition lies the idea of God as transcendent, beyond human comprehension and therefore beyond human language. Apophatic mysticism was developed by an unknown sixth-century writer who is called Dionysius the Areopagite or sometimes Pseudo-Dionysius. It is the kind of mysticism advocated by Saint John of the Cross and reflected in T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets, a work with which Thomas was very familiar. Clarissa Atkinson defines apophatic mysticism as an approach to the knowledge of God and union with him through the way of negation or via negativa, which involves "stripping away sense experience and the products of reason (thought, argument) until the bodily senses and mind of the believer are empty, and the soul is available to receive divine emanations."[1] As a way to knowledge of God, the via negativa proceeds by saying God is not this, not that. As a way to direct experience of God, it requires kenosis, the emptying of the self.

The apophatic approach in theology, called "negative theology," as J.F. Teahan explains, "refuses to assign attributes to God; it argues that all names applied to God are necessarily inadequate . . . [since] God's reality, because it so transcends the world, cannot in principle be described." Teahan adds that the apophatic approach to God "is often paradoxically termed 'knowing by unknowing,' but apophatic knowledge of God is understood experientially, in a manner that suggests radical transformation of the self into God [deification] more than it advances propositions about the nature of the God thus found."[2] The apophatic tradition often uses darkness to symbolize the mystery and incomprehensibility of God and to describe the locus of the mystic experience. This "'Divine Darkness'" is paradoxical, according to Dionysius, because it "'is in truth Light unapproachable, dark through excess of light,'" or "'a Darkness which is beyond Light.'"[3] Finally, as mentioned in the last chapter, apophatic mysticism includes the experience of God's absence as a necessary part of the soul's progress towards union with God. In the darkness of apophatic experience, writes Thomas Merton, the mystic "'gradually

becomes familiar with a God who is "absent" and as it were "non-existent," to all human experience.'"[4]

Thomas clearly believes that God is "something which is not comprehensible"[5] or, as he writes in "The Empty Church" (F), "Someone greater than I can understand." "Incomprehensible" is in a sense a relative term, relative to the relation between the human and the infinite. God is not absolutely incomprehensible, for, as Clyde Holbrook points out, total incomprehensibility would mean that human beings could say nothing at all about God, even that he is incomprehensible, and God would be no God at all. Rather, the term expresses the religious sense of God as impervious to human manipulation and of human impotence and ignorance before the mysteries of life.[6]

Thomas also believes strongly in the otherness of God, a belief characteristic of the apophatic tradition[7] and of Kierkegaard's thought.[8] The poet stresses that God is not human (definition by negation). God is qualitatively different in "After the Lecture" (NBF), "differing in kind / From the human," and in "Hebrews 12:29" (EA), the poet argues that one makes a mistake "to confer features upon a presence / that is not human." "A presence" is often Thomas's way of referring to this nonhuman God. Thomas also stresses that God cannot be located in ordinary space-time, like any other being. As the speaker declares in "Waiting" (F),

> Face to face? Ah, no
> God; such language falsifies
> the relation. Nor side by side,
> nor near you, nor anywhere
> in time and space.

When he lets God's name go and waits at the end of the poem "for the echoes of its arrival," the speaker carefully excludes any description of direction. (One notices in these poems the description by negation.)

Associated with these beliefs is the view that God is also beyond human formulae and theological definitions, which are the products of reason. The definition of God in "After the Lecture" begins, "From one not to be penned / In a concept." "The White Tiger" (F) develops the metaphorical hint in this statement and sees an analogue of God in the beautiful and rare white tiger, pacing ceaselessly in its cramped cage. Thomas vividly evokes the presence and beauty of the great beast: its "glacial / eyes," its movement "up and down in the shadow / of its own bulk," "the crumpled flower of its face" (a brilliant metaphor), which looks at him without seeing him. The comparison of its colour and silence to those of moonlight give the beast an air of mystery and a delicate beauty for its power and size. The poet began by comparing its beauty to the imagined beauty of

God; he ends with the heart of his comparison, the emotions of being caged: the tiger breathes

> as you can imagine that
> God breathes within the confines
> of our definition of him, agonising
> over immensities that will not return.

The poet uses the comparison with a vividly realised tiger to suggest the folly and wrongheadedness of human attempts to define God, for the definitions are necessarily too narrow.

Thomas also uses apophatic language of darkness to describe the incomprehensible God. He wonders in "Pilgrimages" (F) if

> in times
> like these and for one like me
> God will never be plain and
> out there, but dark rather and
> inexplicable, as though he were in here.

God keeps "the darkness / Between stars" in "Via Negativa" (H), while in "The Possession" (F), "God" is "the universal mind that reflects / infinite darkness between points of light." God's blood is "darkness" in "The Gap" (F) and "his interiors" are "darker, more perilous / to enter" than the night in "The Moment" (LP). In several poems, God's presence is implied by darkness or shadows. Besides "Shadows" (F) and "Alive" (LS), discussed in the last chapter, one might mention "The Film of God" (F), in which a shadow on the bright rock is interpreted as God's, and "The Empty Church," in which the speaker prays in hope of seeing God's shadow on the walls. An engagement with God is an encounter with darkness and shadow for the mystical speaker of "The Flower" (LS), at least in the first phase of his experience. The language of darkness preserves God's mystery and incomprehensibility.

The via negativa as a path to knowledge and experience of the divine is exemplified in the first part of "The Flower" as the speaker strives to go beyond sense impressions and gives up his eyes and ears to dwell "in a soundless darkness." As a theological and poetic method, the via negativa is seen in "After the Lecture," for example, and in "Semi-Detached" (F). "After the Lecture" speaks of one "whose attributes are the negations / Of thought," that is, one who can only be described by what he is not: immortal, invisible, incomprehensible, immutable, boundless, infinite, and so on. Such theological language is, according to John McGill Krumm, "in effect a renunciation of language."[9] One remembers that the via negativa sets aside language as well as sense impression. In "Semi-Detached," God amusingly

declares war on traditional images of him that imply physical place and presence:

> I am given to slum
> clearance; I have thrown my images
> outside where they accumulate
> in a huge pile.

He proceeds by the way of negation,

> It is not true
> I am the house of prayer.
> I am neither a voice
> asking, nor is there an ear
> that attends.

He attempts to give "the facts," ironically reverting to the kind of physical imagery he has just thrown out, but returns quickly to the via negativa:

> the house I occupy sustains
> pressures as of the air's
> fathoms, but I am not
> at the bottom of them. I am
> neither down here, nor
> up there. I am where
> I am.

The way of negation is in a sense a refusal to describe, in accordance with its belief that God is essentially indescribable.

Thomas's concern with the absence and silence of God can be seen in terms of the via negativa since they are in essence terms of negation: not presence, not sound. Experiencing them is also, one remembers, characteristic of one stage of apophatic mysticism, the Dark Night of the Soul. The poet himself associates absence and silence with the apophatic tradition and the way of negation in "After the Lecture," in which the undefinable God is also the God who "is not there / To go to," and especially in the poem "Via Negativa," which is about the absent God who is associated with darkness and mystery (he occupies "the interstices / In our knowledge"), yet who leaves subtle traces of his presence: echoes, footprints, reflections. One sees the influence of the kenotic aspect of the way of negation in such poems as "Sea-Watching" (LS) and "The Moor" (P), in which heart and mind are stilled in readiness for an encounter with the divine.

Finally, the incomprehensible, dark, undefinable God is also a God beyond language, and one sometimes sees a reflection of this belief in Thomas's work. Godhead in "Night Sky" (F) is described as "a statement beyond language / of con-

ceptual truth." Thomas views speech as humanity's identifying characteristic, a belief which George Steiner states is "classic doctrine well before Aristotle."[10] Language is the "passport" by which one crosses the "frontier" between animal and human ("One Way" [BHN]), "the unique sacrament of man" ("The hours were long" [ERS]). Though language is the creation of God and he can both use it ("Nuclear" [WI]) and understand it in all its human variety ("Gradual" [BHN]), the poet rarely refers to God speaking in words to the poet himself or to others. A possible exception is "Kneeling" (NBF), in which the speaker waits "for the God / To speak" and expects God to "speak / Through me." Much more often, God's language is either silence or the structures and sounds of nature. His reality is beyond speech. Verbal language remains a human preserve, a tool for subduing reality that the poet himself views with deep ambivalence.

In some poems, as J. D. Vicary has observed, the poet distrusts the ability of language to grasp reality.[11] There is a gap between the name and the thing. In "Abercuawg" (F), the poet cries, "I have no faith / that to put a name to a thing is to bring it / before one." He writes in "Code" (BHN) of "the duplicity / of language, that could name / what was not there," so that language is not a guarantor of reality. In "Which" (LS), language and experience are clearly opposed, and the poem implies that language is not to be trusted. Yet one must beware of taking this view as final. One can find other poems in which Thomas espouses the opposite view. The speaker of "One Way," having passed the boundary between animal and human, which is also that between silence and speech, proudly announces that now he named a thing "and it was / here." As a result of language, "Space gave, time was / eroded." The world falls to the power of language--but God does not. A recent poem, "Nant Gwrtheyrn,"[12] also speaks of the intimate connection between words and things. The title refers to a village on the Lleyn peninsula, site of a now-disused quarry. After being abandoned in the 1950s, the village is now a centre for teaching Welsh to adults.[13] In this poem, Thomas speaks of "quarrying / for an ancient language," the words of which are so powerfully connected to the things they name that the thing was buried when the word died:

> here
> is the resurrection
> of things. One after one
> they arise in answer
>
> to names they are called by,
> standing around, shining,
> by brief graves from whose hold
> willing hands have released them.

More than once Thomas refers to the ancient belief that knowing the name of something or someone gives one power over it, a belief that reflects an intimate connection between word and thing.

However powerful a tool language may be, it cannot encompass God. As Vimala Herman points out, language is part of the finite world and the finite cannot capture the infinite, which has a surplus of meaning. There is a necessary gap between them, which Herman calls a central darkness that defies language and meaning.[14] The limitations of language, its failure in expressing certain kinds of reality, is an old religious truth not confined to apophatic mysticism and negative theology. To many this recognition is not problematic. George Steiner, for example, writes in "Silence and the Poet":

> it is decisively the fact that language does have its frontiers, that it borders on three other modes of statement--light, music, and silence--that gives proof of a transcendent presence in the fabric of the world. It is just because we can go no further, because speech so precisely fails us, that we experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours. What lies beyond man's word is eloquent of God. That is the joyously defeated recognition expressed in the poems of Saint John of the Cross and of the mystic tradition.[15]

As Tony Brown notes, with reference to Steiner's view, Thomas cannot always be so sanguine about the failure of speech because he usually "does not feel himself enfolded by God, but alone, mouthing words into an empty silence."[16] His desire for "linguistic confrontations" with God are frustrated.

Several poems express his sense of the failure of language, but the two most important are "The Gap" and "The Combat" (LS). Both present a God hostile to the attempts of language to name him and actively resistant. "The Gap," one of the mythic poems discussed above, rewrites the story of the tower of Babel to show God putting a mark beside his name in humanity's dictionary, a mark that both reveals and preserves his nature as mystery and incomprehensibility, the enigma at the heart of life. The mark protects the gap of the title, the gap between humanity and God.

"The Combat" reinterprets the biblical incident of Jacob's wrestling match with God in terms of language. Thomas alludes to this story often, so it is obviously important to him, perhaps because he sees much of his own experience of God as wrestling and being defeated. The element of language is present in the original story in the form of names--the "man" asks Jacob his name and gives him a

new one, and then refuses to tell his own name in return--but Thomas makes language the focus of his reinterpretation. The original site of the story, the boundary river Jabbok, becomes "the innocent marches / of vocabulary," Jacob becomes humanity, and the story is told in the first person from the human point of view. The subject is then the futile human attempt to "name" God, to pin down in words and concepts the divine being.

Unlike the conflict in Genesis, this struggle takes place during the day, because the poet wishes to use day as the symbol for life and darkness and night as the symbol for the unknown "from which we emerged / seeking" and to which we return. He implies that the struggle or search for God's name occupies human life. As in Genesis, God initiates the struggle ("You . . . choose / to engage us"), presumably as a sort of defensive attack. If the human weapon is language, God's is silence, with which he "belabour[s] us" and wins. Defeated humanity can only say "you have no name" and "anonymous / you withdraw." The reality of God ("who you are") and his reasons for action remain mysterious and incomprehensible, as God wishes. Language appears to be the only tool by which humanity could obtain the knowledge of God it wishes, as the poet sadly states, "For the failure of language / there is no redress." Science cannot provide the required answers.

The poem ends with a cry of pain, reinforced by rhythm and repetition, at the endless failure humanity must suffer in its search to know God: "We die, we die / with the knowledge that your resistance / is endless at the frontier of the great poem," a poem that cannot be completed. Thomas eventually turns from language as a tool to waiting in silence and wordless prayer, and to his enormous human need, "the emptiness without him of my whole being."

## Cataphatic Mysticism and Theology, Mysticism of Light, and the Via Analogia

It is clear that the concepts and language of apophatic mysticism and theology shape and underlie many of Thomas's poems, and provide a helpful context in which to understand such concepts as absence, darkness, kenosis, and divine otherness in the poems. Yet one can in fact find poems that express alternate traditions: cataphatic or affirmative mysticism and theology, the mysticism of light, and the via analogia or positive way of "analogical affirmation."[17] In the view of Thomas Merton, himself an adherent of apophatic mysticism, the apophatic and the cataphatic are complementary ways, balancing each other and describing the same kind of experience but in different language.[18] "Cataphatic" comes from the Greek verb kataphami, "to say yes, to assent to," as "apophatic" comes from apophami, "to say no, to

deny" (Liddell-Scott). As Atkinson explains, some forms of mysticism allow an approach to God through human emotion, senses, and reason "because of Christ's humanity and because Christian beliefs about Creation and Incarnation do not permit either the world or human nature to be perceived as intrinsically evil or worthless."[19] In this vein, Louis Dupré writes of what he calls "the mysticism of love," which originated in the twelfth century and which, as a result of a broadened understanding of the Incarnation, elevated the physical world to a focus of loving spiritual attention, as a place where God is "intimately present": "As the incarnational consciousness spread to all creation, divine transcendence ceased to imply a negation of the created world. Thenceforth God's presence has been found within rather than beyond creation."[20] A cataphatic mysticism embraces the experience of God in nature.

The mysticism of light describes mystic experience and union with the divine in terms of symbols of light, not darkness. Merton uses it as another name for cataphatic mysticism.[21] Cataphatic or affirmative theology holds that, while God ultimately transcends human knowledge, nevertheless human reason and human language can make statements about the nature of God, based especially on his self-revelation in Christ and in the physical world. It thus proclaims that God is not utterly unknowable or incomprehensible and affirms the validity of concepts, images, and symbols.

The via analogia or way of analogy, simply stated, is a methodology that affirms a connection between the infinite and the finite (especially humanity and the physical world) by seeing the possibility of likenesses between them, to be expressed in analogy. It thus throws a slender bridge over Herman's fathomless gap between the two. Analogy and affirmation have been recognised in Christian tradition as necessary complements to negation. St. Augustine, for example, sees negation, affirmation, and eminence as the three ways of conceiving of God,[22] and according to N. H. G. Robinson, knowledge of God has traditionally been attained through the way of negation, the way of analogy, and the less important way of causality.[23]

Thomas does not use the term via analogia or any terms of the cataphatic tradition in his work, but this does not mean that he does not know of it. Affirmative theology and the via analogia would almost certainly be part of a course of theological study, since they form one of the two main ways of talking about God. Anyone who knows about the via negativa would be very likely to know its complement. Aspects of the mysticism of light Thomas would encounter in the Bible, The Divine Comedy, and St. Augustine. He is also aware of a nature mysticism, though not necessarily in the technical and historical sense. His work itself reflects the cataphatic tradition in four ways. First, like the mystics of light, he sometimes associates God, the experience of

God, and union with God, with light. In "Gift" (EA) and "The Presence" (BHN), the speaker perceives God's presence as light. "Earth" (H) calls God "God of light and fire." In "Somewhere" (LS), the object of humanity's search, which the poem implies is God, is described as "the one light that can cast such shadows," a metaphor for God repeated in "Approaches" (EA), where one judges one's nearness to God by the size of one's shadow ("the nearer the light, the larger the shadow"). "This One" (EA) contains an allusion to John's description of Christ as "the light of men" ("and the light shineth in the darkness" [John 1: 4-5]): "sometimes a light showed itself / in the darkness beyond." "An account in pain" (ERS) describes human love as "a fading echo, despite the darkness, of unquenchable / light," that is, of the God who is love. The nature of God and an encounter with God are expressed in images not only of darkness but also of light.

Second, as suggested earlier, Thomas approaches God through the senses in his encounters with God in and through natural phenomena, for example, the colours and movement of the wind ("The Moor"), birdsong ("Message" [EA], "The Minister" [SYT]), sunlight on a small field ("The Bright Field" [LS]), and weeds, stones, the weather, "the fluency / of water, the articulateness / of green leaves" ("Suddenly" [LP]). (One notes the importance of light to such perceptions.) The sacramental view of nature in these poems hallows the senses, for they are the means of perception. Allied with religious intuition, they allow one to perceive the divine in nature. Even within the church, apart from nature, the kneeling poet remains aware of sounds, shadows, subtle impressions of the air. The poet's approach to God seldom involves the abdication of the senses because of the importance of nature as a locus for religious experience.

Third, although Thomas speaks of God as a mystery to be apprehended through intuition, nevertheless, through much of the poetry, the poet conducts an active search for God and for answers to his questions, a search for understanding that employs the intellect. Throughout his life as a priest, Thomas spent his mornings reading serious works, especially of philosophy, theology, and, later, science. The poetry bears witness to such study in direct allusions to Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Kant, Plato, Aristotle, and Hume, for example, or in the poet's attempts to grasp and employ the new scientific understanding of the universe, with its new vocabulary. If a poem like "Perhaps" expresses the mind's limitations in the search for God ("The mind's tools had / no power convincingly to put him / together"), another like "Emerging" (two pages after "Perhaps" in Frequencies) describes the mind as a tool in the search for God: the mind acts upon "plain facts and natural happenings" to reveal God gradually in the midst of everyday life. There is a strong intellectual element in many poems, not just in the interest in ideas and understanding, the exploration of

different concepts of God or the posing of questions, even if unanswerable, but also in such devices as paradoxical thought and puns, which are the play of the mind. The mind cannot encompass God in his entirety, but it can be used--and Thomas uses it--as a tool in the search for knowledge of the divine.

Finally, Thomas is not content merely to say what God is not (the via negativa). He also makes statements about what God is, and does so through metaphor, analogy, and symbol. This is the via analogia of theology, poetry, and the Bible (which Thomas views as poetry). Metaphor, analogy, and symbol are the traditional methods--some would say the only methods--by which human beings can talk about God. Theologian Charles Bent, for example, states that "Man's knowledge of God is indirect, symbolic, and analogous,"[24] which requires a similar expression in language. Paul Tillich, with whose theology Thomas shows a marked affinity on a number of points, feels that with the exception of the direct statement "God is Being-itself," God must be spoken about in indirect statements using symbols, in order to protect the divine mystery. According to Heinz Zahrnt, Tillich sees assertions that God is love, or a father, or creator, as symbolic statements based on "God is Being-itself," which are not to be taken literally or identified with the divine itself.[25] In "A Frame for Poetry" Thomas himself writes, "how shall we attempt to describe ultimate reality [by which he means God] except through metaphor and symbol?"[26] So metaphor and symbol, the language of poetry, is also the language of theology, even if in a more conceptual and less imaginative sense. One finds even in the apophatic tradition, which believes that one must rise above symbols and images, that these and analogies are necessary if one is to express one's insights and experiences at all.

From where do these metaphors, analogies, and symbols for ultimate reality in Thomas's work come and what are they? American Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor suggests their source when she writes in "Novelist and Believer": "the real novelist . . . knows that he cannot approach the infinite directly, that he must penetrate the natural human world as it is."[27] "The natural human world as it is" encompasses both the human world and nature, and Thomas draws his symbols, analogies, and metaphors from both.

Images from the human world are most frequent among the images for God in the Bible. In his discussion of these biblical images, Clyde Holbrook distinguishes between anthropomorphic images (God has a physical body and functions), anthropopathic images (God has human mental features, including intelligence, and "those human aspects which make up the subjectivity of the self, such as emotion, volition, memory, knowledge, wisdom, and moral character"), the image of God as Creator, and social and historical images.[28] An anthropomorphic, anthropopathic Creator God

dominates the mythic poems, discussed earlier, partly because in them God is treated as a character in a narrative, one who speaks and acts. Outside of the mythic poems, Thomas is generally hostile to what he calls "the anthropomorphisms / of the fancy" ("Emerging"), which imagine God in physical, human form. He does continue to see God as Creator (of language, for example), and as possessing at least two characteristics shared by humankind: mind and love. Godhead is defined in "Night Sky" as "the colonisation by mind // of untenanted space," while "The Tree" (LP) describes God as "immortal mind." Several poems describe God or Christ as love, as will be seen below. To choose just one example here, at the end of "Scenes" (LS), the speaker, awakening in the "huge night," sees "the reflection / in an eternal mirror of the mystery / terrifying enough to be named Love." The poet, concerned about a sentimental view of God as love, chooses to characterise divine love as a terrifying mystery, still terrifying even though seen in reflection and not "face to face." He does this in order to invite the reader to think about how frightening being loved by God might really be. The words "mystery" and "terrifying" allude to the paradoxical mediaeval Latin description of God as mysterium tremendum et fascinans, which Thomas quotes in the introduction to The Penguin Anthology of Religious Verse. "Terrifying" also stresses the analogical nature of "love" when extended to God, as human love is not usually so described.

Social images for God in the Bible are many: father, mother, judge, king, Lord of Hosts, and others. These biblical images are largely absent from Thomas's poetry. Instead, God is seen as scientist, artist (painter, musician, poet, sculptor, conductor), piper, spy, magician, and player of a game. All are new images or are used in new ways, and most are in some sense equivocal. "The Conductor" (T), for example, uses the ancient idea of a cosmic music but envisages God conducting it, making sure that it matches his own score, that nothing unplanned or discordant "troubled the deep peace." In this way, the deity "adored / with a god's ignorance of sin / The self he had composed." The picture is subtly disturbing since God, though sinless, ought surely to know about sin and even be concerned. Also, his self-adoration appears narcissistic, although, of course, one can argue that if anyone has justification to adore himself, it is God. God as a spy, watching and listening to humanity's futile endeavours ("He is his own / spy" [ERS]) is an equivocal analogy, given the connotations of "spy." Moreover God is not just a spy but, in a modern image, a double agent:

> the double agent
> of life, working for
> the continuance of it
> by its betrayal.

That life lives by death is a hard truth, but "betrayal" expresses a lingering bitterness towards such necessity. The poem ends with an expression of God's elusiveness and terrifying reality, which, despite the human analogy, is beyond human.

God as a player in a game is not an original analogy. Salvation as a contest or game between God and the devil with the soul as the prize is a mediaeval conceit, which makes a surprising appearance at the end of "A congregation at prayer" (ERS):

> Does God listen
> to them, crouched as he is
> over the interminable problem
> of how not to cheat, when the hell-born
> spirit appears to be winning?

Hell and the devil are concepts otherwise absent from Thomas's world. Thomas Huxley, in "A Liberal Education; and Where to Find It," compares human life in the universe to a game of chess:

> The chess-board is the world; the pieces are the phenomena of the universe; the rules of the game are what we call the laws of Nature. The player on the other side is hidden from us. We know that his play is always fair, just, and patient. But also we know, to our cost, that he never overlooks a mistake, or makes the smallest allowance for ignorance. To the man who plays well, the highest stakes are paid, with that sort of overflowing generosity with which the strong shows delight in strength. And one who plays ill is checkmated--without haste, but without remorse."[29]

Huxley's analogy reflects the ordered Newtonian universe.

In contrast, Thomas uses the metaphor of a game to express God's refusal to play by human rules, his otherness, and his playfulness. "The Game" (F), to be discussed further in the chapter on science, sees the quirky, paradoxical universe of modern science as a game in which humanity is compelled by a playful God to participate, with no rational rules and no assurance of fairness, since those who cheat God are rewarded in life.

"Play" (F) employs the game of chess as a metaphor for life and the engagement with God, while acknowledging the metaphor's limitation. God resists the neatness of human categories and will not be confined to one: "His mind shines / on the black and the white squares." (One thinks of his sun which he "maketh . . . to rise on the evil and on the good" and his rain which he "sendeth . . . on the just and on the unjust" in Matt. 5:45.) God cannot be forced to

engage humanity in the game nor to play with the same object and by the same rules. Humanity plays with deadly seriousness, betting its all on capturing the queen, "as though to hold life / to ransom." God, "if he plays, plays / unconcernedly among the pawns." If the game can be seen as an attempt by human reason to order experience (and chess is a highly cerebral and logical game), the poem suggests that God's aims and actions cannot be neatly encompassed by reason's structures. The poem uses the via analogia to show reason's limits by in a sense undercutting the analogy: life is like a chess game but God does not play as we do. The analogy also illustrates vividly and concretely the frustration that the search for encounter with God entails. (If one considers that the chess pieces represent a very hierarchical society, God's playing with the insignificant, expendable pawns instead of the more powerful pieces might also be taken to indicate his preference for the poor and despised, the last who shall be made first.)

Finally, Thomas uses metaphors drawn from nature, both animate and inanimate, to express concepts of God. Animals used in analogies include the white tiger, lamb, moth, harrier, predatory beast, hawk, and dove. The Bible describes God as a lion, bear, leopard, and eagle, but the comparisons describe mainly the way God will defend Israel (Is. 31: 4-5), how he will punish a faithless people (Hos. 13: 8), or how he brought the Israelites to him out of Egypt (Ex. 19: 4). By contrast, Thomas uses animal analogies mainly to express God's elusiveness and his terrifying aspect. To the searching poet, God sometimes seems like a beast who does not want to be found. In "Observation" (BHN), God declares,

> I
> am the eternal quarry,
> moving at thought's speed, following
> the hunter, arriving
> before him. They put down their prayer's
> bait, and swallow it
> themselves.

Candles are the bait in "The Empty Church," which are intended to lure God "like some huge moth" into the "stone trap" of the church, while in "The Presence," the bait is the speaker's own silence, by which he hopes to entice the shy presence to "approach / like a wild creature to drink / there." These analogies reverse the traditional Christian view of God as the Good Shepherd, who seeks the lost sheep, or as Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven," who pursues the lost soul relentlessly, out of love. The reversal seems a result of the poet's spiritual experiences, in which he is the hunter and God is the quarry, who sometimes captures him.

Beast metaphors are also used to "revolt against a comfortable, conventional, simplistic view of God," to use Thomas's own description of a main aim of his poetry.[30] They thus remind one that fear is an ancient and appropriate response to God. So in "Calling" (EA), the speaker is tempted to try to call God on the telephone, in order to hear "the divine / snarl at the perimeter of such tameness" as the purring dial tone. In "Moorland" (EA), the ferocious harrier, a kind of falcon, is an implicit symbol of God. "Gradual," though it does not use a beast metaphor, speaks of "the ferocities / you [God] inhabit," which need to be "domesticated" for humanity. Beast metaphors sometimes embody another dichotomy, that between two contrasting sides of God or perhaps experiences of God: the gentle and the harsh, the approachable and the forbidding, tremendum and fascinans. The harrier is "snow- / soft, but with claws of fire," the white tiger combines delicate beauty with power and the acceptance of violence. Thomas makes this dichotomy explicit in "After the Lecture," in which God "holds us at bay with / His symbols, the opposed emblems of hawk and dove." (Note the hunt imagery.) One is familiar with such traditional emblems as the gentle dove ("Dove of God, return to this wrecked ark," prays the speaker in "Fleeing for protection" [ERS]) or the sacrificial lamb which is torn from God's side and in which he sees his own reflection in "Cain" (H). Unconventional emblems like the hawk and the snarling beast, perhaps because of their association with violent death, are disturbing. Hopkins uses the windhover as an analogue for Christ in "The Windhover" but focuses on its beauty and mastery, especially as seen in chivalric terms. If the phrase "my heart in hiding" in Hopkins' poem suggests prey, it does so in a context like that of "The Hound of Heaven," in which capture is desirable, if terrifying. Thomas uses these animals to stress God's power, otherness, freedom from human limitations, and dangerousness.

Inanimate natural metaphors include light, darkness, and shadow, discussed earlier, as well as fire, lightning, star, sky, and shore. Fire as metaphor for God is used like some of the beast metaphors to express vividly God's otherness and dangerousness. The title of "Hebrew 12: 29" refers to the New Testament verse: "For our God is a consuming fire." The poem maintains that "fear is an ingredient / of our knowledge of you" and concludes that

> the mistake
> we make, looking deep into the fire,
> is to confer features upon a presence
> that is not human; to expect love
> from a kiss whose only property is to
> consume.

Bernard of Clairvaux uses the image of God as a consuming fire to express God's power to change the soul by consuming sin and purifying the soul,[31] but in Thomas one finds little of purification. The opposition of love and destructiveness (the consuming fire) recalls the opposed emblems of hawk and dove: God is both, and this poem explores the destructiveness.

Thomas's symbols and metaphors for God are so numerous that in this respect the via analogia dominates the via negativa, as one would expect from a poet whose allegiance to poetry is greater than to any system. It is only through analogy that one can express the ineffable. Just as some people see Thomas only as a poet of doubt, absence, and despair, others see him simply as a poet of negation, darkness, and unknowing, and their view is similarly one-sided. Herman's article "Negativity and Language in the Religious Poetry of R. S. Thomas" is an excellent exploration of its subject, but one finds oneself questioning many of its statements as final descriptions of the work up to 1978, about which it was written. It is not true for all of the poetry up to 1978--or since--that, as Herman states, religious experience is negative in tone, ambivalent, and enigmatic; that Thomas can find no answers; that the gap between God and the finite world defies meaning and language; that the infinite cannot be described affirmatively in finite terms, only negatively; that nature and the material world lack spiritual meaning. These assertions are true for certain poems but not for others. The opposing traditions and ways to God which make up the cataphatic-apophatic dichotomy are in many ways complementary and though negation may be more influential in some aspects, Thomas cannot be confined to one tradition. Though in his spiritual life, the poet seems to leave language behind for silence, he manifestly does not stop writing, and he continues to use symbols and metaphors and analogies to describe his experiences and knowledge, affirming by his poetic practice the validity of language and analogy.

## Deus Absconditus and Deus Revelatus in Christ

The Deus absconditus and Deus revelatus are theological terms used in contrast to each other. They mean respectively "the hidden God" and "the revealed God." They figure especially in the theology of Martin Luther; as Lutheran theologian Roger Nostbakken explains, Luther believed that if God came to human beings as he really is, as the Deus nudus, the experience would kill us. Therefore God deliberately veils himself and comes to us as the Deus absconditus to protect us. God is "hidden" in the natural world and in human beings, although nature is an ambiguous revelation and human beings and animals (called larvae dei, the larvae of God)

are imperfect reflections.[32] The Deus revelatus for Luther is the Incarnate Christ, who perfectly reflects God because he is God. The concept of the Deus absconditus can be associated with the apophatic tradition of negation in two ways. First, according to John Macquarrie, the term means that God transcends human understanding and so can be described most fundamentally by negation.[33] D. Z. Phillips associates it with God's inherent mystery and inscrutability.[34] Second, according to Geddes MacGregor, the idea of the hidden God involves absence, for in his definition of the term, he writes:

> From the believer's standpoint, God may indeed be better known through the anguish of his absence than through the joy of his presence. The cry of dereliction on the Cross . . . is for Christians the classic expression of "forsakenness" that can bring authentic knowledge of God. As sunshine is better apprehended in the darkness and water in the desert, so God may be better known when he withdraws himself than in his disclosure.[35]

(One recalls that Thomas himself used the same reasoning in arguing for the value of absence and darkness in the introduction to his religious poetry anthology and in "Abercuawg.") Although to Luther becoming the Deus absconditus was an act of kindness by God and a way of coming to humanity, not at all an absence, apparent absence is the meaning of the term in its original context, Isaiah 45: 15 ("Verily thou art a hidden God"): during the Exile, God seemed to have withdrawn from his people.[36] The Deus revelatus, on the other hand, can be associated with affirmative theology in that through Christ, knowledge of God and his attributes is possible, in particular that God is love. The concepts of the Deus absconditus and Deus revelatus in Christ are both highly significant in Thomas's religious poetry.

Thomas clearly knows of the Deus absconditus because he uses the term twice in his work. In the introduction to his anthology of religious verse, he describes the God of mystic and poet as "the Deus absconditus" who is immediate to the former and mediated to the latter.[37] This passage certainly implies that Thomas considers God to be a hidden God, who yet can be encountered. Thomas also uses the term in the poem "The Prisoner" (LS), which is a dialogue between unnamed speakers, one reluctant and questioning, the second a poet and believer, who is perhaps Thomas himself ("'You believe then?' / 'The poems are / witness.'") Or perhaps the poem is a Yeatsian projection of an inner quarrel. In the poem, the believer speaks of the presence of God within the prison:

'Deus absconditus!
We ransack the heavens,
the distance between
stars; the last place we look
is in prison, his hideout
in flesh and bone.'

God can be found within other human beings. Later the believer speaks of God as hidden within nature:

'Not meadows
empty of him, animal
eyes, impersonal
as glass, communicate
God.'

This poem reflects Luther's understanding of God as not absent but present in the world under the veil of flesh. So the many poems that sense God's presence in and through nature can be said to portray God as a Deus absconditus. Also, if one accepts MacQuarrie's and MacGregor's definitions, the many other poems that speak of God as the absent or elusive God and the incomprehensible God could be said to reflect this part of the concept. One can conclude, then, that the idea of God as a Deus absconditus is prominent in Thomas's work. Yet the idea of God as the Deus revelatus, God revealed in Christ, is also prominent and too often ignored or given insufficient weight.

Christ is present throughout Thomas's religious poetry, sometimes by name but more often as either an unnamed figure on a cross or tree, or as an implicit presence in the symbols of cross, nails, bread, and wine. In a recent interview, Thomas says, "'What think you of Christ?' has been a key question for nearly 2000 years."[38] His own answer is cast in characteristic dichotomy: "At times his divinity, in its unique sense, seem to me a product of the mythopoeic imagination. At others the Trinitarian doctrine seems best to do justice to the mystery of personality or the divine economy."[39]

The poetry, however, emphasises that Christ crucified is "the crucified / God" ("Cézanne: 'The Repentant Magdalen'" [BHN]). Several poems in H'm also make this point. "Earth," addressing "God of light and fire," speaks of "The hand that fastened you / To the cross." The mythic poems "Cain" and "Repeat" present God readying himself for the journey to the cross, while in "Parry," a fencing match between believer and unbeliever on the subject of God, the unbeliever cries out, "let / Him come forth, history / Yearns for him." In response, the believer pardons that cry "Under the green tree / Where history nailed him." Sometimes Thomas is more ambiguous in his expression: in "Mediations" (LS), for example, God says that he will come to a certain

kind of person "in the body / of a man hung on a tall / tree," but the poem is not specific about the theology of the "man's" nature. This ambiguity is, however, uncommon. Also, most often Christ on the cross is simply identified as God, but occasionally Thomas makes use of the doctrine of the Trinity. In "The Coming" (H), he speaks of God and the son, and the contrast between God and the Cross in "Shadows" and "The church is small" (ERS) implies some level of distinction between God and Christ or the crucified God.

The life of Christ can be divided into four parts: the Incarnation and Nativity, the ministry, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. Of these four, the Crucifixion is by far the most important to Thomas. This is not to say that the others are not mentioned. The Incarnation is described in an unorthodox metaphor at the end of "April Song" (EA): one of the events in "smouldering times" is "the fledgling God/ tipped out of his high / nest into the virgin lap / by the incorrigible cuckoo." The analogy cannot be stretched beyond the main point, that Mary brings up a child not entirely of her own kind, but the analogy is arresting and amusing.[40] "Earth" speaks of many incarnations, which seem to occur no more: "The flesh is too heavy / To wear you, God of light / And fire." The end of "Bleak Liturgies" describes God's "body hanging upon the crossed tree / of man, as though he were man, too," implying both the Incarnation and Crucifixion. More often, the Incarnation is implicit in the many references to God being crucified, to God's body and his wounds. (In a broader sense, one can see as examples of incarnation in Thomas's work those moments in which God is perceived as dwelling in the created world, the moments that are, in Frank Burch Brown's words, "signs of a grace present in the natural temporal order while not restricted to it."[41])

The Nativity has been a popular subject for poets, especially in the seventeenth century, when Milton, Donne, Herrick, Crashaw, and Herbert all wrote on the theme, but also today. The Oxford Book of Christmas Poems (1983) includes a generous selection of modern poets (including, astonishingly, Ted Hughes). The subject has presented scope to poets for paradox, pathos, irony, and adoration, dramatic monologues by all the conceivable personae, and drama, in the sense of a culmination of time, a cosmic turning point. Yet the Nativity has little appeal in itself for Thomas, perhaps because it has become so sentimentalised in popular culture. Thomas's Christmas poems "Hill Christmas" (LS) and "Christmas" (NBF) describe Christmas Eve Eucharistic services, not a Bethlehem stable, although the former employs the manger as a metaphor: after communion, the people "heard love cry / momentarily in their hearts' mangers." Rather Thomas uses elements of the traditional stable scene to express the absence of God and to criticise twentieth-century society. In "Lost Christmas" (YO), an anonymous man

travels a long way alone to find the Child. He sees "three trees, the three kings" and a star "over the dark manger," but "the mind" has got there first and "the manger is empty." The poem suggests that the mind and the Child are incompatible, perhaps because of the mythic nature of the Lucan narrative. In several other poems, the manger is not empty but contains a mechanical doll ("Cones" [LP]) or "the lubricated / changeling of the machine" ("Bleak Liturgies"). The machine has replaced the Christ Child, and its way of life and values have replaced his.

Only in "Nativity" (EA) does the poet come close to traditional Christian feeling. The newborn child lying in its white clothes is compared to the new moon among the clouds. Both shine, "but the light from the one / is abroad in the universe / as among broken glass." The traditional title and the reference to light suggest that the child is Christ. His light and by extension he himself move in a universe that is dangerous to him. He will be cut and bleed. ("Broken glass" as a painful image of sacrifice and service occurs in "The Minister" and in "The Priest" [NBF], in which the priest comes to his people "over the broken glass / of [his] vows.") The association of the infant Jesus with the suffering in his future is a traditional Christian theme, here treated very circumspectly and indirectly.

Christ's ministry appears mostly in scattered allusions to Gospel events and teachings: the miracle at Cana, the pool of Bethesda, the Samaritan woman at the well, the living water, the woman taken in adultery, and so on. A few poems depend more closely on a gospel passage. "The Bright Field" employs the parables of the pearl of great price and the treasure hid in a field from Matt. 13: 44-46; "Farming Peter" (LS) depends on Matthew's account of Peter walking on the water (14: 22-33); and "And this one writes" (ERS) draws on Christ's teaching about the beam in one's own eye and the mote in another's (Matt. 7: 3-5) and the forgiven debtor (Matt. 18: 23-35; Luke 7: 41-3), and also paraphrases 1 John 4: 18 ("Perfect love casteth out fear"). On the whole, Thomas does not retell events or paraphrase teaching.

The Resurrection is mentioned in a few poems. "Suddenly" describes an encounter with the risen Christ in which the robe for which the soldiers dice is "worn / by him in this risen existence." "The Answer" (F) alludes to the stone rolled from the tomb and "the piled / graveclothes of love's risen body," while in "What I ask" (ERS), God "glaciates me / in the draft out of his tomb." Yet clearly the Crucifixion means the most to Thomas, not the Resurrection. The Cross and its burden are central in his religious poetry, and one is led to ask what they mean in the poems. In the tradition of negation and the deus absconditus, Christ on his cross represents the human situation of alienation from God or, which is not quite the same thing, of feeling abandoned by God. Much is made of Christ's cry, "My God, my God, why hast

thou forsaken me?" (reported in Mark's and Matthew's accounts of the Passion, Matt. 27:46, Mark 15:34). Catholic theologians Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler define "Christ's redemptive dread" as "an endurance of the sinner's culpable alienation from God."[42] As editor of a collection of religious poetry, Thomas defends his inclusion of poems of religious despair in the section entitled "Nothing" by seeing them as "but a human repetition of the cry from the Cross."

Yet there is surprisingly little explicitly stated connection in the poetry between the Crucifixion and abandonment by God.[43] None of Thomas's pictures of the crucified Christ emphasise directly his abandonment by God. Many stress God's presence in the Crucifixion. Rather, when Thomas wishes to make a connection with abandonment and the absent God, he does so indirectly and implicitly. An example is the Eucharist poem, "The breaking of the wave" (ERS), in which, as the priest celebrates the sacrament, "The crying of sea-gulls / was the cry from the Cross: / Lama Sabachthani." The Sacrament, itself metaphor of the sacrifice on the cross, is associated by a metaphorical sound with forsakenness.

The Crucifixion is, however, a paradoxical symbol: seen from one standpoint, that of Jesus in Mark and Matthew, it represents an experience of the absent God[44]; seen from the standpoint of the believer, it is a symbol of the Deus revelatus, which reveals something of the nature of God. This is the aspect of the Crucifixion which Thomas's poetry emphasises. Over and over he writes that it is God who is nailed to the cross, and thus the cross symbolises presence more than absence. In this act and symbol of presence, God is revealed in three ways, as the God who comes, who loves, and who suffers.

In contrast to God as the elusive quarry that hides from pursuit, God revealed in the crucifixion is first the God who comes to humanity and desires to be encountered. "Parry" and "Bleak Liturgies" both speak of humanity challenging God to "come forth," and both present the crucified Christ as God's affirmative answer. In "Mediations," a poem of revelation, God offers humanity three paths to him: the way of science, through exploration of the cosmos; the way of mysticism through kenosis, and the way of the Crucifixion:

> I
> will come to you in the simplest
> things, in the body
> of a man hung on a tall
> tree you have converted to
> timber and you shall not know me.

The first two paths are ways one comes to God, but the third is the way God comes to one who cannot travel the other ways. God takes the initiative, despite knowledge of certain rejection.

"The Reception" (LS) is a vivid mythic treatment of coming in which God twice visits the "sullen" inhabitants of a brown world, whose symbolic brownness, invading their minds, keeps them from seeing him. God's first attempt is unsuccessful; he is "a ghost / unnoticed, a body nailed / to a dead tree," defeated by the harsh climate of the place. (The tree is usually living, a "green tree," in Thomas's verse.) Undeterred, God tries again, coming as a white bird, which in Celtic lore is associated with the supernatural and in Christian tradition, in the form of a white dove, is associated with the Holy Spirit. This time God is noticed: the people

> fell upon him
> in silence, seeking for the brown soil
> he deprived them of,
> trampling him into it.

The poem deftly employs symbolic colour, landscape, and seasons with sensuous detail to retell the stories of the Incarnation and Crucifixion in other mythic terms, so that one can see them afresh. Again, God desires and initiates the contact, although as a result he is first ignored and then viciously assaulted.

Thomas suggests that God's coming in the Crucifixion is not confined to the past as an historical event, but continues in present and future time, whenever a person confronts the Cross. The poet does this in poems like "The Reception" and "Repeat," which envisage more than one "crucifixion." He does so also in "The church is small" as he meditates on the shadows behind a cross on the altar of the church. As is often his method, he proceeds from the sharply sketched emblematic picture, the ikon or subject for meditation, to the meaning drawn out of it. Contemplating the ikon, noting the relation between the number of lights and number of shadows (an observation that seems to distract from the main point), the poet concludes:

> So we learn
> something of the nature
> of God, the endlessness
> of whose recessions
> are brought up short by
> the contemporaneity of the Cross.

Though God may seem to be elusive, forever moving away from one, the Cross remains always contemporaneous, anchoring God in the present time of the onlooker. The poem illustrates

the tension between "God" and "the Cross," the elusive God and the God who comes.

Second, the Crucifixion reveals a God of love. When he looks at nature and human affairs, the poet cannot always see this and God seems harsh, but when he looks at the cross, he sees "love in a dark crown / Of thorns blazing" ("In a Country Church" [SYT]), "the crucified body of love" ("There were other churches" [ERS]), and "love // on its cross" ("Where?" [EA]). "Jerusalem" (EA) concludes:

Time

devourer of its children
chokes here on the fact
it is in high places love
condescends to be put to death.

"Condescends" perfectly expresses the idea of the willing self-sacrifice of love. These lines also express one of the most ancient interpretations of Christ's death, as a victory over suffering, death, and the human subjugation to time, an interpretation John Bowker sees expressed in John's account of the Passion.[45]

In that the Crucifixion implies the Resurrection and is inseparable from it in Christian thinking, the interpretation of Christ's death as the victory of divine love over death may also lie behind "The Answer." The poem opens with a description of the recurrent and troubling questions that arise out of human existence and in particular one "which towers immovable / before us." The question is not specified, but in the context of the poem and of Thomas's work, it is reasonable to connect it with the problem of suffering and death. The pivotal point of the poem is the ensuing interrogative: can one answer the immovable question by any way other than thought? The poem presents as its affirmative answer the speaker's experiences of vision, when,

after long on my knees
in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled
from my mind, and I have looked
in and seen the old questions lie
folded and in a place
by themselves, like the piled
graveclothes of love's risen body.

The last line clearly refers to Christ's death and resurrection as the victory of love over death. Thomas's allusions here to the Resurrection accounts in Luke 24 and John 20 effectively make concrete an experience of God, which is characteristically expressed indirectly through simile.

A more ambiguous expression of the Incarnation and death of Christ as an act of love occurs in the deceptively

simple and moving "Court Order" (EA). The speaker, who is finally revealed as Christ, is a fool at the court of a king (presumably God), who invites him to "make some sport with this word 'Love.'" The fool complies and finds himself

> tumbled
> into the world without
> cap and bells, to end up on a hard
> shoulder, not laughing
> with the rest who knew
> that Friday, it being April
> was All Fools' Day.

The fool's birth and death could be the result of the king's making sport with love; he would then be the butt of a rather cruel joke. Or they could be an example of what happens when one begins to engage with love, however lightly: such engagement can have unexpected and painful consequences. Also, God's fool on a cross is an ambiguous picture, given that the fool in Shakespeare possesses wisdom and that Paul in I Corinthians speaks of Christ crucified as "foolishness" to the Greeks. Yet, Paul continues, "the foolishness of God is wiser than men" (1: 23, 25). Again, the apostles are "made a spectacle unto the world. . . . We are fools for Christ's sake" (4:10). Thus the fool, suffering on his cross, though he is the object of worldly derision (in Mark, the passers-by and chief priests mock Christ; Matthew adds the thieves and Luke makes it the spectators, rulers, and soldiers), yet represents the deeper wisdom of God. "Knew" then becomes ironic, for the mockers do not in fact know what they are seeing.

This poem is unusual in that it is one of only two poems by Thomas (the other is "Here" [T]) that ask the reader to share the human feelings of Christ on the cross, in the great twelfth-century tradition of affective piety. Thomas's interpretation of the Crucifixion as primarily an act of love recalls the belief of Langland in Piers Plowman that, as J. A. W. Bennett writes, Christ's death is "the sublime and culminating expression of God's love for man," first expressed in the Creation.[46] As the supreme act of love, it provides the basis for defining God as love, which Thomas does in "Scenes," a poem that identifies the mystery reflected in the universe as love, and in "Cones," in which the "still centre" towards which one travels is the place where God may be present and "where love operates."

Third and last, the Crucified Christ reveals the God who suffers with and for humanity and sacrifices himself out of love. The idea of a suffering God is an important part of Thomas's response to the problem of suffering, which troubles him greatly. At times the problem of pain simply seems insoluble; it belongs to "the dark other side of the mirror that we don't understand."[47] At other times, as Phillips has

shown, he seems to realise that questions relating to suffering and theodicy must be worked through and "died to" (Phillips' words), that they are in a sense the wrong questions and presuppose the wrong kind of God. As Phillips writes, Thomas

> asks us to reflect on a God very different from the omnipotent sovereign bestowed with power to do what he chooses. . . . Rather, the God the poet would have us see . . . seems to be one whose nature is involved with these very features of human life which we want explained away. This is a God who can be crucified.[48]

In "Cain" God sees his reflection in the sacrificial lamb torn from his side: self-sacrifice is an essential part of his nature and crucifixion is accepted willingly. In "Covenant" (BHN) the suffering of God and humanity is interconnected: "He / suffers in us and we partake of his suffering," although the bond here seems one of despair, not love.

God's identification of himself with suffering humanity through the Crucifixion is also suggested more indirectly by the poet's description of human life as a crucifixion and by the scarecrows and solitary trees that appear in his Welsh landscapes and give them spiritual depth. The depiction of human life as a crucifixion is found in several poems spread over a number of years. Thomas closes both "That" (NBF) and "Cadenza" (LP) with the image of nails knocked into humanity's flesh "one by one." In "The Dance" (P) the aging speaker feels crucified by time, while in "Tom" (LS) the title character is a cross on which memory suffers.

Scarecrows are associated in Thomas with humanity in its mortality. In "West Coast" (EA) the people erect a scarecrow that is "the crossed bones / with the flesh in tatters / upon them," and in "Look Out" (EA) the scarecrow is the master of ceremonies at the dance of mortality. Because of its cross-shaped frame and outstretched arms, the scarecrow is sometimes compared to Christ and described as a straw saviour ("Farming Peter"), "one never to come / down, because of his human rags" ("I saw the land" [ERS]). Though the scarecrow is not Christ in these poems, this treatment of the straw man implies a link between tattered mortal humanity and the God who shared that state.

More important than the scarecrow is the solitary tree in the Welsh landscape, which comes to symbolise the Cross standing in the midst of human life. The earliest reference to "the one tree" comes in "The Airy Tomb" (SF) in which, after his mother's funeral, Twm

> Was aware of something for which he had no name,
> Though the one tree, which dripped through the
> winter night

With a clock's constancy, tried hard to tell
The insensitive mind what the heart knew well.

Here, the tree seems less the Cross specifically than the voice of nature attempting to remind Twm of the human longing for something more than a barren loveless life. The next reference, in "Evans" (PS), joins "the one tree" with "blood" and "tortured" to suggest the Crucifixion: leaving the house of a dying man, the priest hears "the drip / Of rain like blood from the one tree / Weather-tortured." The dripping tree is completely natural in its setting but also, because of its details, symbolises the Cross and perhaps too the dying man. One notices how the body and cross are merged into the tree so that the body disappears, and it is the tree that suffers. Within the poem, with its underlying mood of despair at the priest's being unable to bring comfort to Evans, the tree seems to represent the pain of the Crucifixion and its sense of abandonment, which match the dying man's own abandonment, "left stranded upon the vast / And lonely shore of his bleak bed," by the priest and also perhaps by God.

The third occurrence of the one tree, in "That," is more specific still in its association with the Crucifixion. The tree whose shadow "falls/ On our acres like a crucifixion" is associated with human pain and mortality, but the simile points to the figure of Christ and thus to the possibility of God's presence in "our acres." In the last example, "Hill Christmas," the single tree is most closely associated with the Crucifixion because it has a body nailed to it. This sonnet relates the Incarnation, the Eucharist, and the Crucifixion in a way that makes of all three present actions which testify to the presence of God in human lives. The octave describes a Christmas Eve Eucharistic service. In the sacrament, the people encounter Christ, even if briefly: they hear "love cry / momentarily in their hearts' manger." In the nativity metaphor, the Incarnation of divine love takes place within the heart over and over, in the present, as often as the sacrament, which commemorates the Crucifixion of that love, is received. In the sestet, the people leave the church to go home to their barren farms in the bleak winter night. "Their horizon contracted" from the expanse of spiritual experience in the Eucharist "to the one small stone-riddled field," emblematic of their harsh, circumscribed lives of work and suffering. But in that one field is "its tree, where the weather was nailing / the appalled body that had asked to be born." The Crucifixion does not remain a past event confined within Christian tradition, but is an event occurring in the present, in the middle of human life, as Christ, having willed his birth, shares the "appalling" nature of human life. "Appalling" contains "pall," which means both a shroud and a dark cloud of gloom. The poet does not say if the people see the body

nailed to the tree, but its presence symbolises God's identification in suffering with humankind.

When "Hill Christmas" was included in Later Poems 1972-1982, the last line was changed to read "the appalled body that had not asked to be born." If the change is not simply an error, then Thomas has chosen in revising the poem to emphasise Christ's humanity and his identification with the peasants, who also "had not asked to be born," rather than to emphasise his divinity and his act of willing self-sacrifice. I prefer the original version of the last line because it accords with the view in the octave of the Eucharist as a celebration of love, while the second version contradicts the view in the octave and lessens the poem's unity and impact.

Thomas presents the crucifixion as an act of love, a victory over death, and an identification with suffering humanity, but he also suggests in a few poems its connection with human fallenness. The Cross itself is often presented as a human artefact ("a tall tree you have converted to timber" ["Mediations"]) and the Crucifixion as a deliberate human act. Two relatively early poems from Tares (1961) imply that Christ died for human sins, without being at all specific about the theology. "The Musician" opens with a description of a performance by the virtuoso violinist Fritz Kreisler, "This player who so beautifully suffered / For each of us upon his instrument." The poet then draws a parallel between Kreisler and Christ on the cross, "Making such music as lives still" on the instrument of himself. By implication, he too "suffered for each of us." Christ's discipline and control, "the mind bruised but calm" as he transmutes his suffering into music, bears greater similarity in this poem to the controlled figure purposefully finishing the divine plan in the Passion narratives of Luke and John than to the agonised forsaken figure in Matthew and Mark. In this poem, Christ is not abandoned; rather, "closer than all of them the God listened."

The second poem, "Here," can be interpreted, as C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson have shown,[49] in terms both of human evolution and of the Crucifixion. In the latter, "I am a man now" refers to the Incarnation and "I am like a tree" to the Crucifixion. That the speaker's blood "has run clear of the stain / Contracted in so many loins" suggested that he is free from original sin, the fallenness of human nature; yet his hands are not clean: "Why, then, are my hands red / With the blood of so many dead?" If the speaker of the poem is Christ on the cross, then the poem suggests that he bears the burdens and sins of others. A later poem, "Shadows," connects the cross and sinners when it compares the cold shadow of the transcendent and dangerous God with the warmer, welcoming shadow of "the bent cross." The poet concludes, "I see how the sinners / of history run in and out / at its dark doors and are not confounded." "Confounded"

appears frequently in the Authorised Version of the Bible in contexts expressing trust in God, for example Psalm 22:5 ("they trusted in thee and were not confounded") and 1 Peter 2:6 ("he that believeth in him [Christ] shall not be confounded"). The Cross here is an approachable, reconciling symbol of God and his activity. Though Thomas connects the Cross and human sin in these ways, he is not explicit or doctrinal about the connection, perhaps partly because the idea of Redemption is personally troubling to him and partly because he knows that the doctrine of sin has little currency among most modern readers.

Finally, the Cross has a cleansing and healing power of renewal. In "The Prayer" (LS), it is a "deciduous tree" whose leaves, falling like a rich fountain, effect an alchemical change, "turning our autumn / to gold." The Cross is thus seen partly as the tree of life described in Revelation 22[50] ("and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" [v.2]) and partly as the biblical symbol of the fountain of life or of "living waters." This symbol is used for God in the Old Testament (for example in Jeremiah 2:13, where God says, "they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters") and is present in the new heaven of Revelation, in which Christ says, "I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely" (21:6).

Christ as the Deus revelatus conveys for Thomas divine love, reconciliation, and presence amid the suffering of human life. Even when the Cross is seen as Christ's experience of God's absence, it is still God who endures that absence and who is thus still paradoxically present in that experience. Though one misses in Thomas those ardent and tender expressions of personal devotion to Jesus that one finds in Herbert, for example, yet there is a deep feeling for the crucified one in poems like "The Reception," "Court Order," and "Hill Christmas," a tenderness that becomes awe in the vision of "love in a dark crown of thorns blazing." God on the Cross can be found at the heart of Thomas's religious landscape.

## The Personal God and the Impersonal God

In his Penguin Anthology of Religious Verse, Thomas defines religion as "embracing an experience of ultimate reality,"[51] an expression he elsewhere uses for God ("The ultimate reality is what we call God"[52]). Two of the sections of his anthology correspond to two differing ways of conceiving of this reality. The section entitled "God," writes Thomas, deals with "the heart of the traditional religious experience: the confrontation with God, and God as personal." It includes "poems that apostrophize God," that is, prayers, and poems that refer to God as one of the

Persons of the Trinity.[53] The other section, suggestively entitled "It," treats what Thomas calls the consciousness of "the impersonal or un-nameable."[54] In it one finds poems and passages, especially from the Romantic poets, describing the sense of a presence or power in Nature, of a source of life, and of "a mind / that feeds on eternity," to borrow Wordsworth's description in a passage from The Prelude that is one of the selections. "God" and "It," God as personal and God as impersonal or nonhuman are conceptions also found in Thomas's own work.

The personal God who can be named, apostrophised and encountered in relationship, is found throughout Thomas's lyric poetry. In the prayer-poems (to be discussed later), Thomas frequently names God, addressing him as "God of light and fire" and "God of battles" ("Earth") or "God of form and number" ("Emerging" [LS]), as well as the more familiar "God," "Lord," and the personal pronoun "you." In these prayers and other poems, God is treated in Martin Buber's sense as a "thou," with whom one can have a relationship and speak intimately and from whom one can ask for help, benefits, and guidance. In "Message," for example, God offers friendship to the speaker through the medium of joyful birdsong, a relationship requiring that God be personal. "Dialectic" (F) shows a God who desires communication with humanity, who listens, understands, delights in, decides, answers, and teaches, verbs that imply a personal view of God. "Gradual" addresses God with a request for help: "I have come to the borders / of the understanding. Instruct / me, God. . . ." God is presented in personal terms both as the loving God, who speaks to his people ("Ann Griffiths" [LS]) and is generous to them ("Gift") and as the harsh God who wrestles with them ("Service" [P]) and tricks them ("Sleight" [LP]). In addition, Thomas refers to God in terms of the Persons of the Trinity in a number of poems. "In Great Waters" (F) and "Are you coming with us" (ERS) are addressed to Christ and "Phobia" (PS) to the Holy Spirit. "The Coming" and "Shadows" imply God the Father and God the Son, although "father" is never used. The many poems referring to the Incarnation and Crucifixion also present God as personal. The personal God is present in all of Thomas's volumes, including the most recent new collection, The Echoes Return Slow (1988).

The "impersonal and un-nameable," sometimes also called "God," is present in those of Thomas's poems that speak of an anonymous presence or power suffusing the universe, which is not described in terms of human personality. Such poems first appear in the late 1960s, when Thomas began to turn away from Wales towards God as a subject for poetry, and become more prominent in later volumes. An early example is "That," which describes an unnamed power in the world referred to only as "it," which is impassive and indifferent to humanity. A later poem entitled "It" (LP) tells of a

vast, impersonal, cosmic power, which resists comparisons to anything else ("It remained unique"). The poet postulates that it is a composition of chemicals, a mind, or a nervous system with stars at its synapses, but draws no conclusions. "It" occupies no space but is the source of cosmic darkness and stability: "if it should move / we would burn or freeze." This impersonal power, like the one in "That," has little to do with humanity. The end of the poem refers to the growing tree of knowledge, which brings certain harm, but the connection with "it" is unclear. In this poem, Thomas's "it" is close to Van Harvey's definition of "God" as an abstract noun, "the absolute and underlying power of the universe called deity."[55]

Thomas views Wordsworth's perception of a vast mind operating through nature as an example of the "impersonal and un-nameable" (although, strictly speaking, mind is a personal category), and himself sometimes presents God in an impersonal way as mind in his verse. The equation of God and mind goes back to ancient Greece: Aristotle, for example, wrote that "'God is either Mind or something beyond Mind.'"[56] In "Possession," Thomas contrasts the "religious man," who vainly desires a somebody, a personal God (rising from his "fused prayers," he looks at the sky and thinks, "nobody there") and the nonreligious speaker, who possesses "a piece / of the universal mind" reflecting cosmic darkness. "The universal mind" is a relatively impersonal concept compared with "somebody."

Also impersonal is the idea of a life force, which Thomas uses in "In Context" (F): "It was not / I who lived, but life rather / that lived me." The individual self is merely a passive part of a much larger self, not an active, independent participant in a cosmic design. In "Skeleton" (BHN), one is "somehow a part of" a larger presence, which implicitly insists on the continuity of life and its continual rebirth. The presence, which may or may not be an actual life force, is certainly presented as impersonal.

Less inert than "It" but certainly not personal in the traditional way is the nonhuman power that Thomas describes in "The Presence." That this poem presents an experience of God is suggested by the juxtaposition of the activity of prayer in the first two sentences with the description of the power in the third and also by the two similes with which the poem ends. The first compares the power to a wild animal that one must lure to one, and the second compares it to Narcissus looking at his reflection. Both are comparisons Thomas uses elsewhere for God.[57] The power is cosmic in range, invisible, and silent. It acts--gently and benevolently--and engages the speaker, though indirectly: it is felt "nudging" him towards the book he needs to read and looks at him but avoids "eye" contact. The speaker speculates that the power is a consciousness, and though he does not resolve the question directly, the poem suggests that he

is right. "The Presence" shows a poet attempting to describe an encounter with God not conceived in anthropological terms--terms no longer acceptable to many people--but rather as an anonymous presence. ("Llananno" [LS], "Van Gogh: 'The Church at Auvers'" [BHN], and "Conversation" [ERS] are other examples in which God is referred to simply as a "presence.") An anonymous presence is difficult for a poet to describe, and in "The Presence" Thomas successfully conveys the subtlety and mystery of the experience, but one notes that he does so through metaphor and simile drawn from human and natural life. The power "catches me / by the sleeve," its presence is "sunlight quivering / on a bare wall"; one entices it to one "like a wild creature" and it lingers "like Narcissus" to gaze at itself. One notices how the human often creeps back in attempts to describe even the nonhuman God.

Finally, one must remember that both personal and impersonal conceptions of God are themselves analogies, ways of describing a reality that transcends both categories. As British theologian Geddes MacGregor writes,

> when personality and other such attributes are applied to God they are applied by way of exhibiting the claim that God includes values that we commonly call personal as well as those we regard as impersonal, yet recognizing that God is supra-personal. Since we are human beings, our language about everything has built-in anthropological tendencies.[58]

Both personal and impersonal conceptions of God thus reflect something of divine nature. The dichotomy is a paradox.

In Chapters Three and Four I have explored Thomas's search for the true nature of God and for experience of God in terms of six significant dichotomies found in his work: faith and doubt, absence and presence, silence and speech, apophatic and cataphatic mysticism and theology with their *via negativa* and *via analogia*, the *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* in Christ, and finally the personal and the impersonal conceptions of God. All are traditional dichotomies of Christian faith and theology, and thus provide a traditional context within which the poet can interpret his thoughts and experiences, yet his expression of those dichotomies is very modern and often pushes beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. No one would mistake his poems for those of an earlier time. Thus, as he did with myths, he often restates and reinterprets the tradition for a new generation.

The poet's relation to the terms of his dichotomies is dynamic and shifting. He moves back and forth between them and never settles on one term to the complete exclusion of the other. There is no final resolution of tension but

rather a shifting of balance, for example, between faith and doubt. In his darkest volume, there are also poems of faith; in his most affirmative book, there are still poems of doubt. Thus there is always tension in each volume. Thomas does not go through a neat, linear development, a series of separate stages, each one left completely behind when he enters the next. Spiral, oscillating, or meteorological metaphors are in many ways more appropriate to describe his spiritual and poetic journey than evolutionary, progressive, linear metaphors.

This is not to imply that there is no change or development in Thomas's religious verse. Most of the dichotomies discussed come into prominence only after the change in poetic direction that took place in the later 1960s. While the Cross and the personal God are present from the beginning in Thomas's work, the impersonal God first appears briefly in Not That He Brought Flowers (1968) and then in Laboratories of the Spirit (1975), before becoming very important in the volumes from Frequencies (1978) on. The apophatic tradition first appears in one poem in Not That He Brought Flowers; God as darkness is first seen in H'm (1972). The problematic experiences of absence and silence are most common in the books published between 1972 and 1982, with some again in Experimenting with an Amen (1986). The last volume of new poems, The Echoes Return Slow (1988), ends with three poems emphasising love, which suggests that in his age, the poet rests closer to affirmation than to doubt. Also, one notices in the last volumes the increasing prominence in Thomas's thought of two opposing conceptions of God: the impersonal, elusive, absent God and the suffering God on the Cross, present to humanity in love and self-sacrifice. The two terms of this larger dichotomy are held in perfect tension, both between poems (for example, "After the Lecture" and "Hill Christmas") and within poems (such as "The church is small" and "Bleak Liturgies"). These concepts seem to represent the result of his long search into the nature of God.

The terms of each dichotomy are also dynamic in relation to each other. They are not mutually exclusive but in a sense interact: doubt assaults faith, which resists or encompasses it; absence becomes presence and silence speech; the hidden God and the revealed God on the Cross each encompass absence and presence; the via negativa and via analogia are both necessary paths. God is at once near and far, transcendent and immanent, dark and light. In this sense, Thomas achieves the multivalence and setting up of overtones that he says he desires. Thomas's thought pays attention to standpoint or perspective and to complementary truths. It is ultimately paradoxical, not logical, and so is biblical since, as theologian James Kallas writes, "The Bible thinks dialectically, paradoxically, affirming opposite truths."[59] The importance of paradox and dichotomy in Thomas's reli-

gious verse makes it imperative that criticism acknowledge both sides of a dichotomy in discussing and evaluating the poetry.

## Notes

[1] Clarissa Atkinson, Mystic and Pilgrim: the Book and the World of Margery Kempe (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983) 40.

[2] J. F. Teahan, "The Dark and Empty Way: Thomas Merton and the Apophatic Tradition," Journal of Religion 58:3 (1978): 264-5.

[3] Dionysius the Areopagite, quoted in Margaret Smith, An Introduction to the History of Mysticism (1930; rpt. Amsterdam: Philo, 1973) 53.

[4] Thomas Merton, quoted in Teahan 269.

[5] R. S. Thomas, "R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge," Anglo-Welsh Review 74 (1983): 39.

[6] Clyde A. Holbrook, The Iconoclastic Deity: Biblical Images of God (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1984) 201.

[7] Teahan 265.

[8] Roger Nostbakken, personal interview, 7 Jan. 1993.

[9] J. M. Krumm, "Theology and Literature: the Terms of the Dialogue on the Modern Scene," The Climate of Faith in Modern Literature, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr (New York: Seabury, 1964) 23.

[10] George Steiner, "Silence and the Poet," Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 57.

[11] J. D. Vicary, "Via Negativa: Absence and Presence in the Recent Poetry of R. S. Thomas," Critical Quarterly 27.3 (1985): 43.

[12] R. S. Thomas, "Nant Gwrtheyrn," Planet 76 (1989): 14-15.

[13] Meic Stephens, "Nant Gwrtheyrn," Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales, 1986 ed.

[14] Vimala Herman, "Negativity and Language in the Religious Poetry of R. S. Thomas," ELH 45 (1978): 712.

[15] Steiner 60.

[16] Tony Brown, "Language, Poetry and Silence: Some Themes in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas," The Welsh Connection: Essays by Past and Present Members of the Department of

English Language and Literature, University College of North Wales, Bangor, ed. William Tydeman (Llandysul: Gomer, 1986) 174-75.

[17] Teahan 268.

[18] Thomas Merton, The Ascent to Truth (London: Hollis & Carter, 1951) 217.

[19] Atkinson 40.

[20] Louis Dupré, "Mysticism," Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

[21] Merton 20.

[22] "God," Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church 1974 ed.

[23] N. H. G. Robinson, "God," A Dictionary of Christian Theology, ed. Alan Richardson (London: SCM, 1969).

[24] Charles Bent, The Death-of-God Movement (New York: Paulist, 1967) 205.

[25] Heinz Zahrnt, The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century, trans. R. A. Wilson (New York: Harcourt, 1966) 318.

[26] R. S. Thomas, "A Frame for Poetry," TLS 3 Mar. 1966: 169.

[27] Flannery O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer," Mystery and Manners, ed. S. and R. Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, 1961) 163.

[28] Holbrook 108-9.

[29] Thomas Huxley, "A Liberal Education; and Where to Find It," Lay Sermons, Addresses and Reviews (London, 1887) 28.

[30] R. S. Thomas, quoted in D. Z. Phillips, R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God (London: Macmillan, 1986) x.

[31] Smith 70.

[32] Roger Nostbakken, personal interview, 8 Nov. 1992.

[33] John Macquarrie, "Deus Absconditus," New Dictionary of Christian Theology, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (London: SCM, 1983).

[34] Phillips xviii, 153.

[35] Geddes MacGregor, "Deus Absconditus," Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

[36] Richard Clifford, "Isaiah 40-66," Harper Bible Commentary, 1988 ed.

[37] R. S. Thomas, introduction, Penguin Anthology of Religious Verse (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963) 9.

[38] R. S. Thomas, "Probings: an interview with R.S. Thomas," by John Barnie and Ned Thomas, Planet 80 (1990): 45.

[39] Thomas, "Probings" 45-46.

[40] One recalls that Joseph cuckolded by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove is a source of mediaeval humour.

[41] Frank Burch Brown, Transfiguration: Poetic Metaphors and the Language of Belief (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1983) 87.

[42] Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, "Dread," Dictionary of Theology, 2nd ed., trans. R. Strachan et al. (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

[43] Stephen Medcalf is the only critic to have noticed this point, which he mentions very briefly in his review of R. S. Thomas, Poet of the Hidden God, by D. Z. Phillips, and Welsh Airs, by R. S. Thomas, TLS 17 April 1987: 418.

[44] David Edwards points out that the Passion narratives of Matthew and Mark record the cry of dereliction while those of Luke and John do not (Jesus for Modern Man: An Introduction to the Gospels in Today's English Version [London: Collins-Fontana, 1975] 127-28).

[45] John Bowker, Problems of Suffering in the Religions of the World (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970) 62.

[46] J. A. W. Bennett, The Poetry of the Passion: Studies in Twelve Centuries of English Verse (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) 86.

[47] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 39.

[48] Phillips 80; also 31, 60.

[49] C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, The Practical Criticism of Poetry (London: Edward Arnold, 1965) 36-45.

[50] A. M. Allchin identifies the tree with the tree of life in Revelation in "Emerging: A look at Some of R. S. Thomas's More Recent Poems," Theology 81 (1978): 354-55.

[51] Thomas, introduction, Religious Verse 9.

[52] R. S. Thomas, "R. S. Thomas: Poet and Priest," by John Ormond, Poetry Wales 7.4 (1972): 54.

[53] Thomas, introduction, Religious Verse 9-10.

[54] Thomas, introduction, Religious Verse 9.

[55] Van A. Harvey, "God," Handbook of Theological Terms (New York: Collier, 1964).

[56] "God," Penguin Dictionary of Religion, 1984 ed.

[57] The image of God as a wild creature to be lured to one occurs, for example, in "One Way," in which some people claim to call God down "to drink insatiably / at the dark sumps of blood." God as Narcissus is implied in "The Conductor," in which God "adored / . . . / the self he had composed."

[58] MacGregor, "Anthropomorphism."

[59] James Kallas, Revelation: God & Satan in the Apocalypse (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973) 123.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## Priest and Poet

As a priest--especially an Anglican country priest--who writes poetry, Thomas belongs to an important tradition in English religious poetry, that of the priest-poet. The important figures come quickly to mind: John Donne, George Herbert, Robert Herrick, Thomas Traherne, Jonathan Swift, Edward Young, George Crabbe, William Barnes, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, as well as the hymn writers Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley. Of these eleven men, eight were Church of England priests, five of them serving country parishes. The rural parish has been particularly productive of scholarship and literature, partly because, as Thomas himself remarks, "a priest was expected to be studious" and in a "country cure," he had the time "to pursue his studies."[1] Out of the country parsonage have come eminent achievements in the fields of history, theology, antiquities, classics, music, mathematics and the natural sciences, bee-keeping, archaeology, and invention, besides literature. This chapter sets Thomas within the tradition of the priest-poet and examines the influence on the poetry of his vocation as a priest. I shall begin with a discussion of the relation between Thomas's two vocations, emphasising his own views, and then examine the poetry in the light of four main duties of a priest: ministry of the word, ministry of the sacraments, prayer, and pastoral care. Such a study will provide insight into Thomas's understanding and experience of his priesthood and into its significance for his religious poetry.

### Poetry and the Priesthood

Most priest-poets have seen no necessary conflict between their two roles, mainly because they have viewed their poetry as dedicated to God. Donne believed that God was a God of language, especially of poetic language or metaphor. As he says in "Expostulation 19," "thou art a figurative, a metaphorical God too."[2] A God of language and metaphor is a God of poetry. For Donne, according to Paul Standwood and Heather Asals, poetry itself "expresses religious devotion" and "helps to give shape to our soul's destiny." Through its words, the Word speaks.[3] Herbert dedicated The Temple to God as his "first fruits" which "sing . . . thy name." His poems come from God and are returned to him.[4] According to Isaac Walton, his early biographer, he assented to their publication if they would help "any dejected poor

Soul."[5] So interconnected are the priest and the poet in Herbert that when his soul is broken, so is his verse ("Deniall"). Contrariwise, when his soul is in tune with God, the poet feels that he writes well: "If I please him, I write fine and wittie" ("The Forerunners" [167, l. 12]). Herbert hesitates over the style he should employ but not over whether he should write poetry at all. Herrick reluctantly tells his old lover, Poetry, to depart when he decides to enter the priesthood ("Master Herrick's Farewell unto Poetry"), yet by the end of the poem he is imagining her return as a "handmaid" to "my diviner muse," "Though as a servant, yet a maid of honour."[6] Watts and Charles Wesley, two of the great English hymn writers, also saw poetry as the handmaid of religion and an appropriate activity for a minister.

Thomas has repeatedly emphasised the compatibility between his roles as poet and as priest, a belief rooted in a Romantic understanding of poetry and a liberal understanding of religion. He feels that to think one cannot be both priest and poet is to be unduly influenced by the example of Hopkins and Kierkegaard,[7] or to share in society's misunderstanding of Christianity as divorced from the concrete world.[8] For Thomas, poetry and religion have a natural affinity for one another. Both are rooted in "the concrete and the particular"; in this respect, the bridge between them is the Incarnation.[9] Both are also concerned with ultimate reality: religion is an experience of this reality and poetry is "the imaginative presentation of such."[10] Religion and poetry are the two best ways of conveying "the unifying power of the imagination,"[11] which Thomas understands in the Coleridgean sense as "the highest means known to the human psyche of getting into contact with ultimate reality," that is, God.[12] Both priest and poet thus perform sacramental roles, as Thomas explains to Bedwyr Lewis Jones: "God created the whole [that is, the living earth], and therefore I feel when I act as a poet or when I act as a priest that I am doing the same work: conveying the sacrament of the earth, God's earth, to people."[13] The sacramental activity of the poet bringing God to the people (through the concrete world) complements the work of the Coleridgean poet bringing the people to God. By locating the divine in the depth of the physical world and making it the poet's job to reveal it, Thomas avoids conflict between the priest as servant of the divine and the poet as servant of the concrete world. The poet's job is essentially a religious one: "to glorify, to show the true glory of life."[14] As Tony Brown points out, the poet thus "has a pastoral role holding up the image of a spiritual dimension to life, beyond the material and rational."[15] "To glorify" also means that poetry is essentially praise, a concept that would have been familiar to Herbert and to the Welsh bards, much of whose poetry was devoted to praise of their lord, though it is not a concept that Thomas's work often fits.

Perhaps wearying of the question, Thomas is the most forceful in a 1972 interview with John Ormond in defending the compatibility of the priestly and poetic roles and asserts the identity of poetry and religion:

> poetry is religion, religion is poetry. The message of the New Testament is poetry. Christ was a poet, the New Testament is a metaphor; and I feel perfectly within my rights in approaching my whole vocation as priest and as preacher as one who is to present poetry; and when I preach poetry I am preaching Christianity, and when one discusses Christianity one is discussing poetry in its imaginative aspects.[16]

Both poet and priest convey imaginative truth ("the most immediate way of presenting ultimate reality to a human being"[17]), expressed in word and metaphor. The Bible itself is not the direct word of God but is mediated through the experiences of the apostles and writers and expressed in language. Thus both poet and priest are mediators between God and the people.

On the whole, Thomas considers his priestly and poetic roles as virtually identical and therefore compatible because he sees poetry as essentially religious and moral, and religion (Christianity) as essentially poetic in the sense of being mediated through metaphor. However, such statements as he makes in the Ormond interview are too sanguine and simple, glossing over difficulties and tensions. Three sources of tension between poet and priest deserve mention. The first is the problem of orthodoxy, which Thomas dismisses too easily in the Ormond interview. A priest acts a public role; when he speaks, he is not free to utter his own, possibly eccentric views but must present the orthodox beliefs of his church. He is bound to the Word, which is not his own, which is larger than he, and which, as Karl Rahner points out, judges him.[18] The poet is not so bound but may speak his own individual word. As A. M. Allchin says, "the poet, for all his indebtedness to tradition, must speak from the uniqueness of his own vision. The priest, however much he may have made his message his own, must speak in and for the community."[19]

Most of Thomas's verse is not public utterance but personal lyric, and it is often unorthodox. He believes strongly in the freedom of the poet to enjoy "a certain amount of poetic license, freedom to follow . . . the imaginative vision of poetry,"[20] but in the Ormond interview he glides over any potential conflict with the orthodoxy required of the priest. Later, in a 1981 interview, he acknowledges the difference in roles: as a priest, "I was very conscious that it wasn't my duty in the church . . . to expound my own views, because I was there to present the Gospel, and the church."[21] He expressed his private doubts

in his poetry. One notices that such public prose utterances as "A Frame for Poetry," "The Qualities of Christmas," and "Where Do We Go from Here?" express an orthodox faith. He is also aware that the poetry of a priest is judged by an additional standard, which he both enjoys and suffers from. On the one hand, the tension between bound priest and free poet he finds personally satisfying ("I got a kind of kick" out of it) and at times poetically productive in that it elicited a response in certain readers; on the other hand, he feels that his being a priest has contributed to the unpopularity of his poetry.[22] Any serious consequences of being a priest who writes unorthodox poetry Thomas has avoided since his superiors, he says, do not read or understand poetry[23]--and, one suspects, nor do his parishioners.

Second, the priest by virtue of his vocation represents certainty, religious belief, and commitment. He is not groping towards belief but writes out of a basic attitude of faith, which encompasses whatever doubts he may have. One sees this attitude in Herbert, who, throughout his tempests and droughts, keeps his eyes fixed on God and finds repose again in him. Faith and certainty provide the ultimate framework. The poet, in contrast, must embrace uncertainty, according to Thomas, who believes that "Over every poet's door is nailed Keats' saying about negative capability. Poetry is born of the tensions set up by the poet's ability to be 'in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'."[24] A poet of dichotomy, Thomas writes out of both certainty and doubt, and the tension between them is greater in some ways than in earlier English priest-poets, partly because Thomas has lost the social framework of belief that they could count on, and he is very aware of and vulnerable to the powerful challenges to religious faith posed by the twentieth century. That he is a priest adds a depth and edge to his struggle with the faith that he represents.

The third source of tension between priest and poet is the question of ultimate allegiance: is the priest-poet first the priest of Apollo or the priest of God (to borrow Thomas Carew's phrasing in his elegy on Donne)? Herbert, Herrick, Hopkins, and others see their poetry as subordinate to their religious vocation. The metaphor of the handmaid or helpmate, used by several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century priest-poets, illustrates the relation. Poetry is dedicated to God, but if necessary it will be sacrificed. Believing poetry and the priesthood to be incompatible, Hopkins burnt his poems upon entering the priesthood. With Thomas, the question of allegiance is not so clear. Aside from his belief in the merging of the two roles, Thomas's allegiance to poetry is very strong. He consistently defends his independence as a poet from rival claims of priestly orthodoxy, discipline, or didacticism. The poet's job is to write a good poem, not to fulfil a religious purpose. To

Timothy Wilson he said that occasionally he feels a "twinge" at spending time writing poetry: "shouldn't I be visiting the sick and persuading people who don't come to church to come?"[25] He is more emphatic to J. B. Lethbridge and expresses his resentment at anyone telling him that as a priest, he has more important things to do than to write poetry.[26] Thomas implies that poetic ability is a God-given talent and that its exercise is of importance equal to that of the priesthood when he says that "insofar . . . as he [the artist] is created an artist and what is expected of him is art," no one has the right to say he cannot create because he is a priest.[27]

Thomas himself has never been forced to choose, but it is difficult to imagine him burning his poems or viewing poetry as a handmaid to anything. Moreover, in "Petition" (H), one poem in which poetic and religious imperatives clash, the uneasy speaker chooses the poetic. Observing the suffering that human beings endure at each other's hands, the speaker first makes a religious response: "I have said / New prayers, or said the old / In a new way." However, his poetic vocation prevents further action:

> Seeking the poem
> In the pain, I have learned
> Silence is best, paying for it
> With my conscience. I am eyes
> Merely. . . .

The reference to conscience indicates that the speaker knows that besides praying, he should act or speak out to relieve the pain, but he chooses instead to create a poem out of it. "Virtue's / Defeat" seems inevitable in the poem, whatever the speaker may do, and the poem he will find in the pain may perhaps move others, yet the speaker clearly recognises a religious and priestly imperative to speak or act. This poem expresses uneasiness with the rival claims of two vocations, an uneasiness that Thomas's prose conceals.

Thomas's poetry is influenced in style and substance by his vocation as a priest, especially a priest in rural Welsh parishes. The poetry is most directly concerned with the priesthood in the works written before 1970, in which Thomas struggles with his relationship to his parishioners and so with his understanding of his vocation in response to them, and again in the late, autobiographical The Echoes Return Slow, in which the retired priest explores the course and meaning of his priesthood.

One can see this priestly influence in Thomas's expression of the weathers of the soul, the variable spiritual life discussed earlier. The inner life is the priest's special concern, professionally and personally. Thomas aside, Herbert, Hopkins, and Donne particularly have left

records of its movements, especially of the black experiences to which they, as men following a religious vocation, were especially vulnerable. Also, as part of his job, a priest continually faces hard spiritual and metaphysical questions, to which he is expected to provide answers. More than most priest-poets, Thomas wrestles with such questions in his work, without the belief in a divine plan that comforted Donne and Barnes. His refusal to accept easy or orthodox answers gives his writing its painful integrity. Then too, the verse of country priests in particular often features a careful observation of nature, of seasons and weathers, and of the perception of the divine reflected therein.[28] Hopkins, the Roman Catholic priest, and Andrew Young, a Church of England priest, are especially notable for the loving attention paid in their writing to even the smallest natural object as the creation of God. Nature plays a large part in Thomas's verse, too, especially in the early volumes. Poems like "Cyclamen" and "Birch Tree" in The Stones of the Field, Thomas's first volume, reveal a keen eye, delicacy of expression, a gift for striking metaphor, and an ability to enter into an object or scene and to present it seemingly from the inside. Unlike Hopkins or Young, Thomas is more concerned to move from a description of nature to a consideration of its human inhabitants or to spiritual questions that it raises, than to describe individual objects for their own sakes. As he says in "Words and the Poet," nature particularly interests him as a subject when it "manifests itself as the backdrop to a way of life."[29]

The priesthood involves carrying out several roles, according to the ordination service in the Prayer Book, of which four are central and relevant to Thomas's poetry. First, the priest is to be a minister of the word: he is to preach and teach the faith. Second, he is to be a minister of the sacraments, which for an Anglican are Baptism and Holy Communion. Third, he is to be a man of prayer, and fourth, he is to be the pastor of his people, responsible for the care of those in his cure. These four roles describe Thomas's priesthood as reflected in his poetry and so provide a useful structure for considering the close relationship of the priesthood and the poetry.

## 1. Ministry of the Word

To be a minister of the word is primarily to preach. From a physical (the raised pulpit) and spiritual position of authority, the preacher expounds the Bible and church doctrine, exhorts and admonishes the congregation, and applies his understanding of religious truth to the lives of his people and often to the wider community. For the priest-poet, his role as preacher can be reflected in his poetry as

an interest in doctrine, didactic and hortative tendencies, a fondness for imperative verbs, and a voice of moral authority, which can run from calm and gentle to dominating and vehement. One sees the preacher in Herbert's homiletic "The Church-Porch," with its exhortations to moral behaviour, in "Prayer (I)," which teaches the nature of prayer through an accumulation of metaphor, and in "Redemption," which presents that doctrine imaginatively, as experienced by the speaker. Through The Temple runs the concern of the preacher to present Anglican doctrine in a variety of pleasing ways. One also sees the poet-preacher in Herrick's Noble Numbers, with their didactic and hortative epigrams and close dependence on Scripture; in Edward Young's "Night Thoughts," which resembles a long, gently melancholy sermon; and in Crabbe's satiric portraits of village life in The Parish Register.

Thomas the preacher is seen most strongly in the poems of the first half of his career. In "Words and the Poet," he says, "There is always lurking in the back of my poetry a kind of moralistic or propagandistic intention." Having a "slight gift" as a poet, "I used that gift as the best way I knew for getting a particular message across."[30] Thomas's message arises from his encounters as priest-poet and as nationalistic poet with his Welsh parishioners and has to do both with their spiritual condition and their relationship with the land and with what he sees as the desperate condition of modern Wales. (The two areas of concern are not unrelated.) In the poetry published after 1970, when Thomas ceased to write about his parishioners, he is much less "propagandistic."

The role of preacher influences the style and structure of Thomas's poetry. In his early verse, Thomas is sometimes guilty of what R. George Thomas calls a "denunciatory and hortatory" tone,[31] directed not just at the peasants but also at the reader. In "A Peasant" and "Affinity" (both in SF), the poet adopts a moral position in regard to his peasant subject and judges him by a certain standard, implicitly inviting the reader through diction and details to share that judgement. Then he turns on the reader to judge him by a different more spiritual standard. "Affinity," a good example of a homiletic poem, begins with a portrait of the peasant emphasising his deprived life as judged by broadly accepted standards of a fulfilling life: physical comfort, a family, a rich emotional life, and purpose to one's existence. The reader is directed to "consider this man" and the details invite sympathy, but then the poem suddenly shifts focus. The reader, comfortable, superior, and distanced from the peasant, suddenly becomes the subject of the priest-poet's homily and is asked to examine himself critically by spiritual standards, to "pull out the drawers / That rot in your heart's dust" and to acknowledge both his own spiritual poverty and his kinship

with the peasant. The potential arrogance of the speaker is deflected by one's feeling that the reader's supposed reactions and faults are also the speaker's own and that he is chastising himself as much as his reader.

Besides the moral authority of the speaker and the judgement of peasant and reader by spiritual standards, one notices in "Affinity" other examples of the influence of the preacher on the style of the poems. One example is the use of imperatives in guiding the reader's response: "Consider this man," "hold your tears," "ransack your brainbox." In his early poems, Thomas is at times too obtrusive and insistent in guiding the reader into position, directing his attention, and telling him what to conclude. Later the poet becomes more subtle and indirect. "The Kingdom" (H) is a homiletic and didactic poem, but it avoids the imperative and the battering, hortatory tone completely. It simply lays a choice before the reader; one can freely enter the Kingdom of God "if you will purge yourself / Of desire" and present oneself with only one's faith and one's need. The poem is content to imply as well as to state, and to allow the reader to decide.

A second example is the simplicity and plainness of the writing, characteristic of all of Thomas's poetry before 1970 and many of the later poems. This style resembles the plain style of English poetic tradition, which was revived by the Movement poets,[32] although Thomas was never a member of that group. The expression is bare, sober, and uncluttered, the vocabulary simple and common without being colloquial, and the sentences complete (not fragments), rational, and clear in meaning. This style Thomas attributes to three factors: poetic choice, his nature, and his experience as a preacher and teacher. When Jones asks Thomas about his practice of stripping language to the bone, Thomas replies, "Yes, yes, I try deliberately to do that. But it is likely that that's my nature."[33] The bareness of his language is a conscious poetic choice and the expression of an austere man. Thomas prefers simplicity and has a spontaneous affinity for "the simplicity of a small stone church in the country with plain glass windows and the cadences of the Bible and Prayer book in classical Welsh or English."[34] It is the simplicity of the Holy Communion, he says, that comforts him.[35] Thomas also relates his style to his experience as preacher and teacher of a simple, unintellectual people: "I'm sure this has had the effect on my work of making it sort of simple on the whole. I've always had to try and make myself intelligible. Instead of saying things in a concise implicated way, I tend to labour the point really because I've been so used to doing things." Later in this interview, he describes his work as "limpid and clear as water" and speaks bitterly of the critical derision he has endured as a result.[36] This description applies particularly to the work

published before 1970, but it underlines the influence of the preacher in that work.

In the later work, Thomas deliberately moves away from this style in many poems, partly perhaps because he is no longer directly engaged with his parishioners in his poems but rather with God, in pursuit of a personal quest for knowledge and experience arising out of his ministry to his people. Thomas has said that while he propagandised for the Welsh he felt no desire to propagandise for "something as intangible as God."[37] As his concern centres more intensely on the theological and speculative and his focus expands from a stony acre in Wales to the cosmos, his language includes more abstractions, polysyllables, and specialised vocabulary. The new style is more enigmatic, abrupt, even at times fragmentary or obscure. Some poems eschew rational discourse and elude satisfactory comprehension. The change in style reflects both a different subject and the frustrations and difficulties of a poet struggling to express that subject. Thomas is still often the preacher and teacher, and he continues to write poems of social criticism, which maintain the public voice of the preacher-prophet though their focus moves from Welsh society to Western society in general. He also writes poems that enlighten their readers on more narrowly spiritual matters. Poems like "Apostrophe" (EA), which describe how to be nearer to God by remaining still, and "Waiting" (BHN), which counsels prayer in these times of unbelief, still reflect the teaching function of the priest but combine his moral authority with that of the poet as spiritual man, writing out of his own experience. The tone is more private.

In their study of the Anglican clergy, Robert Towler and A. P. M. Coxon distinguish between two understandings of the clerical role: the priest as religious specialist and the "universalistic" understanding of the priest as "the man charged with the tasks of representing the whole community and passing judgement on every aspect of society and its culture."[38] Although he denies that he is in any sense a prophet and does not present himself as delivering the judgement of God, nevertheless throughout his work Thomas evaluates "society and its culture" against what are ultimately spiritual standards, especially the importance of the individual and of the bond between a people and their land, and the immanence of God in a living earth that must be cared for. Thus in the Welsh poems, he reviles mechanisation because it breaks the peasant's bond with the land and denies the latter's sacredness ("Earth" [T]). The machine and the materialistic economy that goes with it destroy the peasant, his dignity and his freedom in "Too Late" (T). In the later poems, as I have shown, Thomas uses myth, fable, and emblematic scenes, in addition to direct address to show the spiritual poverty of a society in thrall to the machine and to a science divorced from spiritual values. Western

industrial society has led to a trivialisation of culture: the people sitting on the ancient rocks, eating their junk food, smoking, and listening to pop music on their transistors, are oblivious to the meaning of the rocks and destroy the solitude and silence necessary if they are to hear the voice of God.[39] Thomas's voice at times seems near despair, and in Experimenting with an Amen one senses that though he continues to speak, he feels hopeless about being able to change anything.

Finally, the ministry of the word is exercised mainly within the setting of a liturgical service. Thomas says that as a priest he is therefore "concerned with a worshipping community,"[40] but most of the poems that describe a service present a bleak picture. The uncollected "To Church"[41] and "Service" (P) both emphasise separation and failure, the hardness of the congregation that the priest cannot reach. There is little reflection in Thomas of a mutually-supporting "worshipping community." The church is most often empty. Religion in Thomas's work is, as it was for Kierkegaard, a solitary experience.

Thomas clearly loves the language of the liturgy for its beauty, simplicity, and "reverberative power," which conveys "overtones, those signals from an ever present reality."[42] He writes against the modern revision of the Prayer Book and, in "Funeral" (BT), he speaks of "The simple splendour of the wreath / Of words the church lays on him" (that is, the dead man). Except for the Eucharist, however, the liturgy's influence on Thomas tends to be indirect and to lie in its simplicity, rather than in specific images, references, or the idea of ceremony or order, as it is in Piers Plowman or the poems of Herbert, David Jones, or Geoffrey Hill.

The concept of time in liturgy is the cyclical time embodied in the round of seasons and in the Church year that reflects it. Liturgical time is circular, rhythmic, ordered, and repetitive. As Paul Stanwood comments: "time rests and takes its ease in literature which is liturgical."[43] The half-dozen poems that express cyclical time all refer to the seasons of nature, not of the Church, and emphasise endurance ("The Minister" [SYT]) or recurrence ("The Moon in Lleyn" [LS], with its reference to Yeats's cyclical theory of history).

For Thomas, time is more often unidirectional than cyclical, "time's arrow." It is associated with progress, evolution, mortality, and history. More than a dozen Thomas poems are chronological poems, tracing a theme--literary, philosophical, religious--over centuries. "God's Story," (LS), "Taste" (LS), and "Perspectives" (LP) are examples. Sometimes the emphasis is on sameness rather than change over time: the peasant endures untouched by the passage of time (at least, until the tractor arrives), but time is still directional, symbolised by road or river: the peasant

and the poet stand aside from the main road on the turning to eternity.

Only in the references to the Crucifixion as not confined to the past of history but as occurring now and always does Thomas seems to reflect a ritual and Eucharistic notion of time, for ritual, as Margaret Visser writes, "links the present with the past, and it hopes also to link the present with the future."[44] Thomas's descriptions of the Eucharist itself, however, stress an encounter with Christ as sacrificial love and a oneness with creation more than order or the stitching together of time.

## 2. Ministry of Sacraments

Thomas struggles for a sacramental understanding of nature and views language and poetry as sacrament, but "sacrament" here means the sacraments of the Church, which are Baptism and Holy Communion, vehicles of grace. Baptism occurs only once, in a poem called "Vocation,"[45] which Thomas, I think wisely, refused to reprint. In this poem, the priest acts to "brush" the infant's "unseeing eyes" with water, "the Church's / Sublime dew." Themes of death and rebirth or renewal are largely absent from Thomas's poetry. The Eucharist, however, is crucial to his spiritual life. In the Holy Communion, the concrete bread and wine provide for him "a medium of contact with reality," that is, with God. When Thomas asks himself, "How do I talk to a living Christ in Welsh or English?" he answers, through Communion: "But then there are the bread and wine."[46] To a poet who seeks encounter with a God who seems absent and silent, the Eucharist provides great comfort and meaning.

An integral part of the liturgy of Holy Communion in the Prayer Book is the confession of sins and absolution, which prepare the communicant to receive the Eucharist. The themes of confession and absolution run through Thomas's poetry, most often in reference to himself. Poems of critical spiritual self-assessment reoccur in his work, with titles like "Judgment Day," "Self-Portrait," and "Biography." They are characterised by a ruthless integrity, the absence of self-pity or excuses, and in the later poems, an edge of self-disgust, which reminds one of the confessional entries in Dag Hammerskjöld's Markings.[47] In these poems, Thomas judges himself harshly by standards of love and courage, failing abysmally to meet either. His faith and his vocation demand self-sacrificial love and yet, in "Biography" (EA),

> one came to your back door
> all bones and in rags, asking the kiss
> that would have transformed both you
> and him; and you would not,

slamming it in his face, only
to find him waiting at your bed's side.

The last line, with its allusion to Heb. 13:2 ("Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares"), implies that the tramp is Christ, whose demands cannot be so easily ignored.

All of these poems reveal contrition, but none includes absolution. Their purpose is to express a sense of failure, not to relieve it. Absolution is found instead in a poem in which the priest confesses not to God or to the reader but to his people his sins against them. In "Absolution" (PS), addressed to Iago Prytherch, Thomas's typical peasant, sounding board, friend, and confessor, the relationship of priest and parishioner in Communion is reversed. It is the peasant who breaks "the light's / Bread " at his "stone altar" and bestows the forgiveness that the contrite priest seeks for his earlier scorn of the peasant's life. The peasant's enduring role is sacred. All of the penitential poems show the identity of priest-poet with the community of sinners that he serves.

Thomas refers to the Eucharist in many poems and also uses bread, blood, and the chalice in the imagery of other poems to add eucharistic overtones. He interprets the rite in an orthodox way, as an encounter with Christ and as an expression of divine love, forgiveness, and sacrifice. When the priest in "Bread" (PS) has prayed for "love that would share / His rags' secret," he breaks "the live bread for the starved folk." The act flows from the love. "Live" recalls Jesus' teaching in John 6 that he is "the bread of life," "the living bread" that gives eternal life and that is his flesh, given in sacrifice. In the section of "Perspectives" entitled "Christian" (LP), the wine in its chalice is "a blood-stained mirror" into which sinners peer "with one eye / closed, and see themselves forgiven."

The finest of Thomas's Eucharistic poems is "In Great Waters" (F), a dignified and reflective expression of faith in God's presence with the crew of a sinking fishing trawler and in his power to bring meaning out of their deaths. In its theme and in other respects, it resembles Hopkins' "The Wreck of the Deutschland." Both are sacerdotal poems, written by men who in their vocations often face tragedy and have to reconcile it with faith. Both are not a first response but a considered final position in which the terrified experience of the dead is respected but also the presence of Christ is discerned in the wreck, transforming the meaning of the tragedy for the poet and, in "The Wreck," for the "tall nun," too. Finally, both poems are doxological prayers, though "The Wreck" is a prayer only in parts. Thomas's much shorter lyric, however, is a more serene, reflective expression of faith and compassion than Hopkins' intense, excited narrative, in keeping with Thomas's focus

on a quiet, mysterious "sea-change," rather than on the hurly-burly of the storm. Thomas's poem merits close attention because of its quality and because it exemplifies several ways in which he uses the Eucharist in his poetry.

The poem begins with the shipwreck, economically described through an extended metaphor as a mountain-climbing accident: "the precipice / of water," that is, the wave that sank the trawler, "was too steep / for the drowned: their breath broke / and they fell." God is present at the foot of the cataract of water, where the men die, but, given that a precipice is a steep rock and "rock" is a common biblical metaphor for God ("He only is my rock and my salvation" [Ps 62:2]), the poem also suggests that God is somehow implicated in the event and encompasses it. This is the God who both afflicts and comforts and who is present and identifies with the suffering.

The rest of the poem, lines 5-15, presents God's sacramental transformation of the tragedy into a Eucharistic celebration, each element of which possesses a suggestiveness that enriches the picture. The trawler's deck becomes the altar and its spars "your cross,"[48] linking the dead sailors with Christ the divine victim. The sand is the bread, the light the wine, and the natural world the church. The use of sand and light as the elements emphasises the sacredness of nature and its sacramental value. Such a eucharistic link between the physical and the spiritual occurs in many Thomas poems, for example in "The breaking of the wave" (ERS), in which "The breaking of the wave / outside echoes the breaking / of the bread in his hands," or in "The Moor" (P) in which "the air crumbled / And broke on me generously as bread." The wording of this last is echoed in "In Great Waters": "The sand crumbles / like bread." Light as the wine recalls Christ's declaration, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

The communicants are "the sea shapes," whose strangeness adds mystery to the transformation, and the "ministrant" (which means "servant") is Christ himself, the suffering servant. As the priest, Christ or God creates from the elements of the tragedy a sacrament, a sign of grace that is "more beauty / than terror." The beauty transcends and subsumes the terror but does not obliterate it. The transformation is spiritual, a context of meaning that invests the elements of the scene with radical significance while leaving them in substance what they are, as in Protestant tradition occurs with the eucharistic elements during consecration by the priest.

The creation of beauty out of experience, even out of terror, is characteristic not only of God and of the priest, but also of the poet. God's transforming activity, in which he invests bread and wine or a sunken trawler with spiritual meaning, parallels the artist's creative activity, in which he transforms the stuff of ordinary life, of tragedy even,

into art. The poet as priest and art as a sacrament are common twentieth-century themes, legacies primarily of Romanticism, which elevated the imagination and its expression in poetry and revered the poet as prophet, teacher, legislator, and priest (Shelley calls poets "the minister[s]" of good and "hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration" in The Defense of Poetry[49]), and secondarily of Victorians like Matthew Arnold, who saw poetry as the new religion, replacing a discredited Christianity.[50] Joyce makes a religion of art in The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, with Stephen Daedalus as the chosen one, the "priest of the imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life."[51] Seamus Heaney uses the blacksmith analogy also used by Joyce when he describes the blacksmith/poet as a priest, the anvil his altar where he transforms iron into artefacts ("The Forge").[52] For David Jones, art is always sacramental and sacrament is art. Both "re-present under other forms," recall, show forth, and remember. The artist then is like a priest, transforming the elements into something new.[53]

In the same vein, when Thomas writes in "In Great Waters" of God's transforming activity, he writes also of his own as priest and poet. Like Christ, he takes the elements of the shipwreck and transforms them into something "more beauty / than terror," which is both the priest's understanding of the tragedy and the poem itself. The Eucharist is both part of the subject of the poem and its process. "In Great Waters" is one of the poems in which priest and poet work perfectly together.

3. Prayer.

Central to the spiritual life of Thomas both as priest and as man is prayer, which holds a correspondingly important place in the poetry reflecting that life. Prayer is discussed, depicted, or demonstrated in more than eighty poems. One-third of these poems are themselves, in whole or in part, prayers. The poetry presents prayer as a way of searching for God, of experiencing God, and of serving God and his people, the particular function of the priest.

Much of Thomas's religious verse describes his passionate search for God, and prayer is a mode of seeking, which is sometimes successful, sometimes not. Many of the metaphors that Thomas uses to describe prayer express its nature as a spiritual tool to contact God: it is bait to catch God in "Observation" (BHN); "gravel / flung at the sky's window" to attract God's attention in "Folk Tale" (EA); radio waves and a probe launched into "the God space" in "The New Mariner" (BHN) and other poems. These last, particularly modern metaphors, emphasise the exploratory nature of prayer, sent out into the vast silence. Especially striking is the meta-

phor of prayer as a match, which forms the sestet of "The Empty Church" (F). The octave of the poem describes the church as a "stone trap" for God, into which he can no longer be lured. "Why, then," asks the poet, "do I kneel still / striking my prayers on a stone / heart?" He answers himself with another question: is it because he hopes that one prayer will "ignite" and throw God's shadow on the church walls? These fresh and vivid metaphors for prayer root it in human experience and present it as a doubtful venture; the possibility of an answer seems remote, though not nonexistent.

Thomas also portrays prayer as a struggle in which one wrestles with one's questions and doubts or with God. In "The Answer" (F), the speaker struggles in prayer with seemingly invincible existential problems, while in "Service," the priest invokes God and "my shadow / Wrestles with him" and is thrown. Thomas's experiences of prayer naturally mirror his understanding of God. In the poems mentioned thus far, God is absent, silent, or elusive, hence their prevailing tone of anguish. As William Noon writes, there is "a special solitude" that accompanies attempts to pray to a God felt as absent: "The silence that men of faith endure while waiting for God to speak is often bitter and desolate."[54] These poems also stress the active nature of prayer; in it, one strives to reach God.

Sometimes such active prayer is efficacious. For the man on his knees in "The Belfry" (P), his prayers, crossing the gap between God and himself, may be "warm rain," regenerating the frozen heart. Yet the poet comes to feel that such prayer is too often self-centred, the ego clamouring for God's attention. It also depends too often on outdated anthropomorphic images of God. As God says in "Semi-Detached" (F), "I am neither a voice / asking, nor is there an ear / that attends." Thomas moves away from the active view towards an understanding of prayer as primarily a passive activity, which may be verbal but is more often silent. Prayer is not only talking to God, but also an attitude of focused attention to God, of waiting on God, and of spiritual receptivity. In this sense, prayer is a way of living, not an activity. It is thus clearly related to mysticism and indeed some scholars define mysticism as a kind of prayer. Dom Cuthbert Butler, for example, calls it "'the prayer of loving attention.'"[55] Prayer as silence can be found in the writings of Kierkegaard, who believed that the "language of prayer is the language of openness, and, understood in its deepest sense, the language of openness to God is silence . . . . To learn how to pray is to learn how to keep silence before him."[56] Though Thomas never gives up verbal prayer, prayer as silence, stillness, waiting on God and oneness with God comes to dominate his poetry.

Three poems from Laboratories of the Spirit illustrate Thomas's new attitude to prayer. It is both the form and the

subject of "Emerging," the opening poem of the volume, which contrasts the speaker's former and present understandings of prayer. The first half of the poem describes the kind of prayer left behind, which is mainly an aggressive petitionary prayer that sees itself as a contest with a reluctant God, who must be badgered and importuned to grant one's request: "I would have knelt/ long, wrestling with you, wearing / you down." This kind of prayer is active and self-centred, revolving around the relentless petitioner and his self-perceived wants. "Hear my prayer, Lord, hear / my prayer" echoes the congregational response to each petition in the Litany in the Prayer Book. This half of the poem ends with a sly and vivid metaphor of praying mortals as a swarm of gnats, shrilly crying to a deaf God, "explaining your silence by / their unfitness."[57] The second half expresses Thomas's new understanding of prayer that sees it as a mystical union of God and believer, a merging: "the annihilation of difference, / the consciousness of myself in you, / of you in me." Such prayer is passive and non-verbal, it is experiential rather than petitionary, and it embodies unity rather than separateness. It is contemplative prayer.

The second poem, "The Prayer," represents a search for authentic prayer, which moves dramatically from the rejection of one kind of prayer through petition and seeming failure to fulfilment. As the poem opens, the unnamed man (perhaps the poet) prepares himself for prayer by kneeling, the posture of supplication and humility. He considers and rejects various prayers as "inappropriate." That they are described as "orisons" suggests that they are formal and use a more complex order of language. The man then chooses an "old" simple prayer expressed in monosyllables: "Teach me to know / what to pray for," a prayer that is in essence the second petition of the Lord's Prayer and is, according to Ralph Townsend, the core of all Christian prayer.[58] The man's humility contrasts with the frantic egocentrism Thomas so disliked. The man then waits patiently for an answer through experiences that suggest the failure of prayer: for example, he sees, like Macbeth, a "parade / of ghosts," evidence of the failure of "his past intercessions." Though he stretches out supplicating hands, "cupped / as though to receive blood, leaking / from life's side," his hands and mouth remain dry. There is no renewal from the crucified Christ. He waits in silence and meets only silence.

Then, in the last seven lines of the poem, a prayer that is a response to his prayer, his humility, and his patience, "formed." The prayer comes from God as a gift, an act of grace that addresses the supplicant's spiritual aridity, "the long drought / of the mind." As the agent of renewal it offers "the deciduous cross," a rich, dynamic image that is first the Tree of Life for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22), then a source of purification, and finally an agent of alchemical transformation: its leaves turn

"our autumn / to gold by the affluence of their fountain." The developing symbol of the tree, partly traditional and partly new, fulfils the very prayer it composes, because of its rich language and associations. The poem expresses what verbal prayer should be.

Prayer as waiting in patient hope is a recurrent theme but never finds more serene expression than in the third poem, "Sea-Watching." This poem is a beautifully phrased and controlled exploration, almost a discovery, of the relationship between prayer and watching an area of sea for a rare bird. The poem opens with a simile that suggests this relationship and sets the scene: "Grey waters, vast / as an area of prayer / that one enters." A simile keeps the two activities separate and subordinates prayer, but one is now alert to a second level of meaning. When the poet goes on to say that he has watched the sea daily for years, yet has observed "Nothing / but that continuous waving / that is without meaning," he implies that the "rare bird" he watches for is also God. The sea is an ancient symbol of eternity and the meaninglessness of its "continuous waving" has an existential implication, inapplicable to bird-watching. The speaker's disappointment is emphasised by the lineation, which isolates "Nothing" at the end of an otherwise empty line, and by the juxtaposition of "something" and "nothing."

In the next verse paragraph, the speaker answers his doubts by reminding himself that his quarry, the rare bird, comes by definition very infrequently and also secretly, "when one is not looking,/ at times one is not there." I have mentioned earlier the remarkable ability of this poem to portray absence as presence; in these lines, the bird fills time and space outside the poet's own direct apprehension of them. Lineation again isolates the significant words, "that it comes," which contrast with the earlier "nothing." The poet then links prayer and sea-watching by analogy when he advises himself, "You must wear your eyes out, / as others their knees," but the device of analogy still keeps the two activities separate and sea-watching is dominant.

In the last verse paragraph, the speaker now haunts the seashore, "the hermit / of the rocks, habited with the wind / and the mist." The metaphor of the hermit brings the birdwatcher who watches the sea and the man who prays closer together. In his solitary life close to nature, the speaker has ecstatic experiences that reward his long patience and discipline, experiences that are expressed in the central paradox of the poem: the bird's "absence / was as its presence." At the end of the poem, the speaker realises that his watching and praying, separate at the beginning of the poem, have become one.

Thomas's identification of sea-watching and prayer, the rare bird and God, is natural and unforced. He convinces one that for him the two activities are, in a way, the same. The

identification of watching and praying is biblical: Christ admonishes the sleeping disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane to "watch and pray" (Matt. 26:41). Also, as A. M. Allchin points out, watching and vigilance are the essence of prayer in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.[59] Yet Thomas makes one see the connection in a fresh way, which arises out of his personal experience. Then too, he presents the prayer of patient waiting as a response to the perceived absence and silence of God. Thomas's experiences parallel traditional mystical experience in his long years of discipline, his focused mind, and the ecstasy of his culminating experience, which emotion is skillfully built up by the careful phrasing and lineation of the last eight lines. The continuous meaningless waving of the sea in the poem, reinforced stylistically by the short phrases and flowing rhythm, general absence of initial plosives, and lines that begin now at the margin, now further along the line, functions like the mantra in Eastern mysticism, occupying the conscious reasoning mind in order to release the intuitive mind,[60] which can "rest" in the waters without analysing. "Sea-Watching" comes as close as words can to describing mystical, non-verbal prayer and so provides a temporary resolution, through the metaphorical and sensuous resources of poetry, of the tension between poetry, which must use words, and prayer, whose highest form is silence. It is one of Thomas's finest poems.

As Thomas grew older and more pessimistic about modern civilisation, he came to see the prayer of patient waiting and openness to God as a better response to the times than action. This contemplative attitude is expressed well in a poem like "Waiting." The present times are described felicitously as "the small hours / of belief"; "small hours" combines present darkness and the expectation of light to come. In such dark hours, "the one eloquence // to master" is not that of the pen or of action, but the silent eloquence of prayer:

> the bowed head, the bent
> knee, waiting, as at the end
>
> of a hard winter
> for one flower to open
> on the mind's tree of thorns.

The final image is one of hope: after the hardest winter comes spring. Out of suffering (the tree of thorns conflates two Crucifixion images) comes the mysterious, wondrous flower.

The priest's role in prayer is both passive and active. Like any believer, he must learn the value of prayer as waiting in stillness and silence, and "Kneeling" (NBF) shows that he has. The priest kneels alone in his stone church, "waiting for the God /To speak." As a priest, he knows that

God will speak through him, but in the prayer at the end of the poem, he asks God too to wait a while first; like Milton, the priest knows that "The meaning is in the waiting." The priest's role is presented with an interesting ambiguity in this poem for though he is humble in posture, the theatre imagery which runs through the poem enhances his importance. The sunlight rings him like a spotlight, "as though I acted / A great rôle," and God is cast as the prompter, as well as the playwright.[61]

Because of his vocation, the priest also exercises a more active role in prayer, both in church and outside of it. "Service" uses the act of prayer in a church service to dramatise the priest's despairing sense of isolation from his people. The priest is supposed to lead the congregation in prayer, but the people reject such communal activity and leave their priest "alone / with no echoes to the amen / I dreamed of." Later in the service, when he wrestles with God in prayer, the people preserve their impassive, hostile separation: "They see me thrown / Without movement of their oblique eyes." As Roland Mathias remarks, the priest "is not so much their intermediary with God as their weekly sacrifice to him."[62] Such rejection of the relationship in prayer between priest and people causes the priest to see his church as "this place / Of despair." Outside of the service, prayer is an expression of the priest's concern, a response to suffering. "Phobia" (PS), "Survivor" (T), and "The Mill" (BT) all refer to prayer for parishioners in need of it.

Finally, part of a priest's function in prayer is to bring the praise and concerns of his people to God as their representative. Thomas does this largely though describing in a prayer the difficulties human beings experience in encounter with God and their feelings about their experience. "Combat" tells God about humanity's futile attempts to "name" God and their anguish at their failure. Prayer is about relationship,[63] and these poems share with one member of the relationship the feelings and experiences of the other. They are, as John Bunyan defined prayer, "'a groaning out of our condition before the Lord.'"[64] Though God presumably does not need to be informed of anything, the one praying gains understanding and self-knowledge through the attempt to articulate individual or communal feelings and experience.

Thomas's prayer-poems comprise some two dozen poems, all or part of which are addressed to God. A few of these poems use the prayer form as a literary device; their aim is to say something about the groups praying rather than to communicate with God. So "A congregation at prayer" (ERS) uses a humorous parody of corporate prayer to criticise the congregation's pompous, smug arrogance and the kind of petitionary prayer that assumes an omnipotent God intervening from outside in earthly affairs, rewarding his own with worldly blessing. In its satiric purpose, the poem resembles

Robert Burns' "Holy Willie's Prayer" or John Betjeman's "In Westminster Abbey."

In style, Thomas's prayer-poems are personal lyrics, not public or liturgical pieces, which must be communal expressions. Thomas's poems are not formal in language or structure. In fact, he seems to distrust formal, corporate prayer, typified by the Litany and the Collects. He writes of it with disfavour in several poems, including "The pretences are done with" (ERS), in which he is glad at his retirement that "the formal / orisons" are over. Such an attitude must have created tension in a priest required to conduct hundreds of services in his ministry. None of the prayer-poems begins with an invocation, except for the parodies: "The congregation at prayer" uses parallelism and the traditional collect form but only in parody. Some of the poems simply address themselves to "you." Others address "God" or, less commonly, "Lord," but place the vocative later in the poem, so that it functions as a part of conversation rather than the call for attention that Thomas disliked. "O" is never used, although the more Romantic "Ah" appears once or twice, as in "Ah, vertical God" ("The Cast" [EA]). Unlike Herbert, for example, who wrote colloquies, Thomas's poems are all monologues. He might pose a question to God but does not imagine God answering. The exception is "Sleight" (LP), in which a voice, presumably the voice of God, sounds out and the speaker answers. However, Thomas makes the colloquy equivocal by his characteristic use of "as though": "as though a voice / said to me not / in words." "As though" moves the voice into the realm of possibility rather than certainty.

Thomas employs the traditional kinds and parts of prayer: thanksgiving in "Gift" (EA), intercession in "Phobia," petition and request for guidance in "Gradual" (LP), confession in "Judgment Day," lamentation in "Combat," and praise in "Praise" (WI). He does not use a special language in the prayers, except for the traditional imperative of petition in "The Prayer" ("Deliver me") and "Conversation" ([ERS]: "Grant that . . ."). The verse is dignified but not formal, conversational at times but not homely or colloquial. In fact, Thomas's style is the same in his prayers as in most of his other poems. He has no special aesthetic of prayer nor can it be said that he finds a new language for verbal prayer.

Finally, prayer presupposes belief in an Other to whom it is addressed. Prayer-poetry thus has two audiences, God and the reader. Some of the poems emphasise one audience or the other. A doxological prayer like "Praise" keeps its attention focused on God and God's actions: the pronoun "you" features prominently and is the subject of most of the verbs in the poem. "The Combat, on the other hand, though addressed to God, is focused on the human side of the encounter with God, experienced as failure and ignorance.

"You" is the object of some verbs as well as the subject of others. The poem as an articulation of an aspect of human life is addressed as much to the reader as to God. According to Anthony Nuttal, having to keep one eye on God and the other on a human audience is characteristic of the priest praying.[65]

4. Pastor

According to the ordination service, the priest is to "feed and provide for the Lord's family," that is, to be a pastor to all, sick and well, within his cure. This pastoral relationship, which one can think of as ministry to the people outside of the services, is the source of many of Thomas's doubts and difficulties, and provides the driving force behind many of his poems, particularly the Welsh poems and The Echoes Return Slow. Unresolved tension gives many of these poems their characteristic edge.

The pastoral poems present a clear unsentimental portrayal of character, a portrayal that can be compassionate or critical or both. In this respect, Thomas is typical of country priests, whose vocation and small communities leave little in human nature or human veniality a surprise. Besides the many parsons who wrote diaries, journals, and memoirs full of character and incident, one thinks of Crabbe, with his sharp sense of character and narrative and his keen moral stance, and of Barnes, warmer in tone but similarly acquainted with a variety of rural characters and the events of their lives. As a lyric poet, Thomas does not have as strong a narrative element as they do, but he does provide a number of short character sketches of men, women, and children who populate his parish: Iago Prytherch and the many anonymous labourers and farmers, of course, but also "An Old Woman," "Farm Child," "A Gardener," "Farm Wife," "An Old Man," "Tramp," and numerous others. Many of the characters are individual, such as Catrin in "The Observer" or Marged in the poem of that name, but others are more types than a specific individual, composites of many individuals representing a kind of person Thomas met in his work.

Thomas displays the pastor's understanding of human relations and his awareness of what goes on beneath surface appearances. Many of the poems describe relationships--between wife and husband, parent and child, even mother-in-law and daughter-in-law--with psychological insight. One example is the well-known "Meet the Family" (PS), which concisely conveys the nature of a marriage and its deadening effect on the offspring, even after the parents are dead. Other poems show the pastor's grasp of social and sexual nuances. "The Visit" (P) describes an angry woman's call on the priest and focuses not on the superficial level of what was said but on what was not said, on the social, sexual,

and psychological subtext of the encounter: her deeply ambivalent feelings for the priest and the disparity between her stinging words and her smile, his apparent detachment and the revelation of his feelings indirectly by the statement of what he does not do.

Thomas adopts a variety of emotional attitudes towards his people, often within the same poem. The variety and contradiction in attitudes reflect the intensity of the bound relationship between priest and people (which is like a marriage), his shifting experiences with them, and a personal ambivalence towards them, an ambivalence that they also feel towards him: "Hearts wanting him to come near. / The flesh rejects him" ("The Priest" [NBF]). Occasionally the priest is patronising or superior, as in "The Muck Farmer" (PS), which emphasises the distance between the poor farmer, with his "warped heart," and the wiser observers, poet and reader; or in "'How good of you to come'" (ERS), a tense, sardonic account of a party at which the uncomfortable priest ironically remarks to himself, "My superiority surprises / me." Occasionally the priest is warm and generous in praise, as in "Farm Wife" (PS), his surprisingly emotional paean to the farmer's wife in her kitchen as the emotional centre of the family.

Sometimes Thomas is full of anger and hatred towards the people, arising partly from personal hurt at their failure to appreciate what he as priest and poet offers them. "A Priest to his People" (SYT) expresses his "initial hatred" of his "savage" parishioners for their "scorn . . . / Of the refinement of art and the mysteries of the Church," and of his hurt at his irrelevance to their "crude" and ancient way of life. He remains at the same time committed to them and admires them for their strength and endurance. Admiration for the peasant, especially for his mute endurance, grows in importance in the pastoral poems as the priest struggles to understand and minister to him. These poems and others describe the peasant in terms of animal imagery, which explicitly or implicitly contrasts them with the priest and the world of the intellect, emotions, beauty, and spirituality associated with him. The contrast embodies a moral judgement of superiority with which one may agree (a life with beauty and thought is better than one without), and the imagery is usually used to emphasise the peasants' deprived lives, not the priest-poet's superiority. Yet at times, the animal imagery reflects a distaste and lack of charity, as in "The Calling" (L), where birth is described as "the dropping of their inane children." Such instances, however, which conflict with one's ideal of what a priest ought to feel, are evidence of Thomas's integrity in expressing what he as priest to these people sometimes does feel.

Most often, Thomas's pastoral poems express an understated compassion for his people. In poems like "Survivor," "Out of the Hills" (SF), "The Mill," and "An Old Woman," he

describes their lives and characters with clear integrity and sympathy, not glossing over the faults but not dwelling on them with fervour either. The compassionate tone reflects his pastoral care for them. At times, however, such reserved compassion can seem a trifle chilly: the prayer at the end of "Phobia" that the dead phobic woman should be led "From the mind's darkness into the light / If not the comfort, of truth's flame," seems an inadequate response, lacking the warmth and breadth of compassion found in Barnes' Dorset poems or the fatherly concern for the soul that Hopkins put into "Felix Randal" and "The Bugler's First Communion."

Thomas also adopts various stances towards his people. In some poems he is the priest as censor, with a moral authority. "Age" (PS) criticises the farmer for his neglect of his wife in favour of the land; it is one of many poems that show Thomas's sympathy for the women on the farms, reduced to being the "farm's drudge, / Breeder of children" ("Earth" [T]). In "Survivor," the priest provides a spiritual diagnosis of the character and sins of an eighty-five-year-old man and prescribes the "cure" that he as priest will undertake: "Old and weak, he must chew now / The cud of prayer and be taught how / From hard hearts huge tears are wrung." Priest as moral authority combines with priest as spiritual healer and comforter, a related pastoral role. In other poems, Thomas is not the authority but the learner, taught and ministered to by the people. This is one of the main insights at which the priest-poet arrives in his retrospective volume, The Echoes Return Slow. As one of the prose pieces explains, "Everywhere he went, despite his round collar and his license, he was there to learn rather than teach love. In the simplest of homes there were those who with little schooling and less college had come out top in that sweet examination" ("The holiness of the heart's affections"). There is a reciprocity in the relationship between priest and people in Thomas that counters the authority.

Two conflicting pastoral roles reflected in the poetry are the priest as representative of his people, bound to them in self-sacrificing love, and the priest as detached observer. The former can be seen in two poems in Not That He Brought Flowers, a volume in which Thomas directly examines his priesthood, before moving away from the parish as a subject. "They" describes the priest ministering to the inarticulate "negligible men" (referring to their social status) of his parish, who come to his door with their sorrow. As a doctor of the soul, he knows their deeper problem: they have shut God out of their lives; the reason they weep is "their worsting / By one whom they will fight." Thomas sees the priest as the mediator representing his people: "Daily I take their side / In their quarrel, calling their faults / Mine." This is the role also of Christ, who is called in the New Testament a high priest. Though Thomas says he has no love for them, "only a willed / Gentleness,"

his steadfast identification with them contradicts that statement. "Please" articulates the priest-poet's tense, even hostile relationship with his people. He is derided, unappreciated, cruelly treated, but, like Christ, he refuses to retaliate and reiterates his identification with them: "Through tattered sunlight / I go, and make your dreams / Mine." This concept of the pastoral role extends beyond the narrowly spiritual to a concern with the whole man, including the political and social as it affects the lives of the people. As Barnes wrote of the effect on his people of enclosures, Thomas mourns the depopulation of the hills, afforestation, and mechanisation for what they do to the lives of his hill farmers.

In contrast to this identification, Thomas often adopts the stance of an observer, detached from the people. One sees this position in the many poems in which he observes the farmer in his field; in "The Observer" (NBF), in which he says he was born "to see / What I see," the suffering in the world; and in "Petition," in which he is "eyes / Merely, witnessing virtue's defeat." Vision is a key motif in Thomas's work. References to eyes, looking, watching, windows, and mirrors run throughout the verse. Observation is connected with understanding, with his drive as priest to understand the peasant in order to minister to him, and to understand the world, especially the place of suffering. Sight more than the other senses is the means by which Thomas experiences the world and learns.[66] Detachment also seems natural to Thomas as a solitary man who feels uncomfortable with too many people around. As he told Wilson, "'I am essentially an escapist, a countryman seeking the semi-seclusion of nature. I get uneasy with relationships and too much pressure from personalities.'"[67]

"On the Shore" (BT) is a revealing poem in this respect, for it shows a man who wishes to keep a distance between people and himself so that he can know them as human and hear their voices, but not know their identity or hear the triviality of what they say. Distance allows him to love them while protecting him from hurt and disillusionment: "I watch them through the wind's pane, / Nameless and dear."

Yet the role of detached observer is ultimately more appropriate to poet than to priest. It simply exacerbates the loneliness and isolation that he as a priest already feels for other reasons. As Tony Brown points out, Thomas's "reserve" and "detachment" are "as much responsible for the barrier between him and his flock as their own incapacity to communicate their inmost feelings."[68] The tension between identification and separation must have been a constant source of pain for the priest.

Carrying out his pastoral duties arouses in Thomas feelings of failure and doubts, which cause him to question the validity of vocation at all. His parishioners appear indifferent to God, the "ashes" in their souls "too long

cold' ("I was vicar" [ERS]). All the priest's efforts cannot rekindle the fire. He senses that, to the Welsh hill farmers, the Church and the priest seem irrelevant in their lives. Poems like "Poste Restante" (LS), with its empty church and despairing, crazed priest, extend that feeling of futility and irrelevance into the future. Like the children in "Earth," the people "have said No! / To the spirit's usual invitation."

Visiting the suffering, the sick, and the dying brings suffering also to the priest and radical, troubling doubts. "Survivor," in which the priest speaks out of confidence in both the validity of his pastoral work with the dying man and his ability to carry it out, is an exception. In "The Mill," the priest visits a bedridden man. He gazes attentively at the man's face, listens to his talk, reads the psalms to him, prays, and then is still. Watching him slowly die over nine long years, the priest feels ground in a mill. The painful image expresses his own suffering with the man. Similarly, in "The Priest," as the pastor comes back from a visit, images of pain contrast with the images of life and growth that described his trip up "a green lane" to make the visit: "He comes slowly down / In the dark, feeling the cross warp / In his hands, hanging on it his thought's icicles." Cold thoughts hanging on a warped cross in the darkness imply doubts about his faith and the validity of his pastoral ministry.

"Evans" (PS), discussed in Chapter 4, is more despairing, lacking the final affirmation of "The Priest." Its powerful image of "the dark / Silting the veins of that sick man / I left stranded" on "the lonely shore of his bleak bed" expresses the priest's anguish and guilt at his failure to provide comfort to the dying man. This poem forms a striking contrast with "Felix Randal," in which Hopkins expresses utter confidence in the good effect of his ministrations to the dying farrier:

> Impatient, he cursed at first, but mended
> Being anointed and all; though a heavenlier heart began some
> Months earlier, since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom
> Tendered to him.

Hopkins' attentions to his "child" are expressed in parental terms, which Thomas never uses: "My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears." Hopkins is able to greet news of the man's death with equanimity, knowing his duty well done.

Three poems on vocation, published within six years of each other, reveal Thomas's understanding of his calling and his struggle with it. The first, "The Priest" (1969), is a grave, reflective portrait that moves with dignity through

stanzas of four to six lines in the third person to a final one-line affirmation in the first person, which makes of the rest of the poem a personal statement. The poem portrays the loneliness of the priest as he "picks his way / Through the parish," forced to act and speak carefully. If he is an observer, he is also observed, watched by eyes that keep him at a distance. People are ambivalent in their response to him, and ministering to them is painful and arduous. Priests must travel "a long way" and walk "over the broken glass / of their vows" in order to care for a reluctant people who will not make it easy. The priest often suffers doubts and feelings of failure as a result. The fifth stanza presents an imagined response by the reader ("you") to this picture of the priest. He is a "crippled soul," whose sacramental ministry is irrelevant to many people contented to do without what he can offer. This response is countered by and included in the final affirmation: "'Let it be so', I say. 'Amen and amen.'" Though the priest's life is painful and lonely, though there are those who reject him and his church, the priest-poet who speaks is content. He accepts the pain, loneliness, and rejection as part of a sacrificial vocation and his affirmation gains power from its recognition of the cost.

"Vocation" (1970),[69] the second poem, is a serene statement of the value of priesthood, reiterated at the beginning of the poem ("Mine is the good cause / If lost") and at the end ("Against times / That infect I offer my / Priceless inoculation"). The poem relates the priest to the ceaseless round of birth, marriage, and death, events that are serenely accepted and over which he presides through the rituals of the Church. The poem is untroubled by doubts, and loneliness is absent. Priest and people, "Together / We mend the edges of / Our amens." For once, the priest is happy and content. However, the poem is a little too untroubled, its serenity too easy. One misses the recognition of the cost of the priesthood that would give the serenity conviction and the verse a tautness which it lacks.

With the third poem, "The Calling" (1975), one is back on the familiar ground of doubt and torment. The poem is a powerful vision of the despair felt by the priest of a "lean parish," whose bond with his people means that he shares their brutal lives without being able to change or comfort them. The title suggests purpose, mission, authority, and an elevated view of the priesthood, but the expectations it arouses are immediately undercut. The conditions of ministry are so harsh that the speaker cannot decide if the call comes from a god or a devil. After the first sentence, the poem is presented as "the word" (with its ironic associations of prophecy, as in "the word of the Lord"), which comes to the potential priest in a series of strong imperatives, beginning with the urgent "Go." The priest is to embrace solitude, silence, and suffering, to submit to

having his dreams broken and his belief in spirit tested by the emptiness of his people's faces and the supremacy of physical needs in extreme conditions: the soul prostitutes itself "for a corner // by the body's fire." Mortality in the form of an ever-hungry earth dominates, and the priest must watch his people die, one by one, "with the crumpled ticket of your prayers / in their hands." To pray for his people is an important function of the priest, but "crumpled ticket" suggests doubt about the efficacy of such prayers. Even birth is distorted: it becomes "the dropping of their inane / children."

The poem ends with the image of the window, familiar in Thomas's poetry and used in "On the Shore" to divide and protect him from other people. The priest is warned that the window (here between him and life) is thin and that "the mind cuts itself if it goes through." "If" allows for the possibility of keeping the window in place, of remaining an observer, but by placing the line about the cut mind last, the poem implies that real ministry requires such painful engagement. The whole poem is an attack upon idealistic conceptions of ministry. The depth of emotion and the furious energy in the poem arise from the priest-poet's own experience, his own hurt and disillusionment. As a comment on the priesthood, it is not Thomas's final position, but it must be balanced against "Vocation," "The Priest," and other more affirmative works in assessing Thomas's understanding of his priesthood.

As the influence of organised Christianity declines in an increasingly secular age, the priest-poet may become an endangered species. Among the few such poets writing today, Thomas is by far the most important. His status as priest underlies and influences all of his work, not just the poems that directly reflect his priesthood but also the poems of personal search. For the reader who is aware of Thomas's vocation--and nearly every volume includes poems that reveal it--his or her response to the work is influenced by the poet's priesthood, which becomes part of the work's meaning. The reader's expectation that the poems of a priest would be poems of commitment and faith are challenged by the doubt, anguish, unorthodoxy, and questioning expressed in many of them, and the conflict contributes to the impact of the poems. The tensions between poet and priest, priest and people, priest and himself are vital in much of the poetry. Besides, however he may suffer and complain, he never renounces his fundamental commitment to God and to God's people, his parishioners.

Thomas's work is a valuable record of a sensitive and truthful man's attempts to understand and act on his calling in the middle twentieth century and of its cost to him. As both poet and priest, he struggles with language in order to convey God and God's truth as he sees it to peasant and

reader, and he faces his failures with anguish. His work reflects some of the traditional characteristics of priest-poetry, but it reveals more fully than before the parish priest's ministry, both sacramental and pastoral, and his inner feelings about it. A poem like "The Calling," in which he attacks the subject of his vocation, represents something new in priest-poetry, for though his predecessors may have questioned their vocations, they were questioning their own fitness for the call, as Herbert does in "The Priesthood," not the dignity, efficacy, and relevance of the priesthood itself.

## Notes

[1] R. S. Thomas, "Probings: an Interview with R. S. Thomas," by John Barnie and Ned Thomas, Planet 80 (1990): 30-1.

[2] John Donne, "XIX. Expostulation," Devotions upon Emergent Occasions (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1959) 124.

[3] P. Stanwood and H. Asals, eds., John Donne and the Theology of Language (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1986) 125, 44-45, 9.

[4] George Herbert, "The Dedication," The Poems of George Herbert, ed. H. Gardner (London: Oxford UP, 1961) 3, ll. 1, 4. All references to Herbert's poems are from this edition.

[5] Isaac Walton, quoted by H. Gardner, introduction, The Poems of George Herbert xvi.

[6] Robert Herrick, "Master Herrick's Farewell Unto Poetry," The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick, ed. J. M. Patrick (New York: New York UP, 1963) 543-46. The lines quoted are 99-102.

[7] R. S. Thomas, "R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet," by John Ormond, Poetry Wales 7.4 (1972): 52-53.

[8] R. S. Thomas, "A Frame for Poetry," TLS 3 Mar. 1966: 169.

[9] R. S. Thomas, introduction, A Choice of George Herbert's Verse (London: Faber, 1967) 15.

[10] R. S. Thomas, introduction, The Penguin Book of Religious Verse (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963) 9.

[11] Thomas, introduction, Religious Verse 9.

[12] Thomas, "Priest and Poet" 54.

[13] Trans. from the Welsh and quoted by Tony Brown, "Language, Poetry and Silence: Some Themes in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas," The Welsh Connection: Essays by Past and Present Members of the Department of English Language and Literature, University College of North Wales, Bangor, ed. William Tydeman (Llandysul: Gomer, 1986) 165.

[14] The same interview, quoted in Brown 165.

[15] Brown 165-66.

[16] Thomas, "Priest and Poet" 53.

[17] Thomas, "Priest and Poet" 54.

[18] Karl Rahner, "Priest and Poet," Theological Investigations, vol. 3, trans. K-H. and B. Kruger (London: Darton, 1967) 309.

[19] A. M. Allchin, "The Poetry of R. S. Thomas," Theology 73 (1970): 490.

[20] Thomas, "Priest and Poet" 53.

[21] R. S. Thomas, "R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge," Anglo-Welsh Review 74 (1983): 38.

[22] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 38, 56.

[23] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 50.

[24] Thomas, introduction, Religious Verse 11.

[25] Timothy Wilson, "R. S. Thomas," Guardian 15 Sept. 1972: 8; rpt. Critical Writings on R. S. Thomas, ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: Poetry Wales, 1982) 70.

[26] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 47.

[27] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 47.

[28] John Press speaks of the priest's "keen, unsentimental observation of rural life, of men's customs, behaviour, and beliefs no less than of birds, beasts, and flowers . . ." (Rule and Energy: Trends in British Poetry Since the Second World War [London: Oxford UP, 1963] 139.

[29] R. S. Thomas, "Words and the Poet," R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose, ed. Sandra Anstey, intro. Ned Thomas (Bridgend: Poetry Wales, 1983) 83.

[30] Thomas, "Words and the Poet" 83.

[31] R. G. Thomas, "The Poetry of R. S. Thomas," Review of English Studies 3 (1962): 87.

[32] James Knapp discusses Thomas in relation to the Movement in "R. S. Thomas and the Plain Style in Postwar British Poetry," diss., U of Connecticut, 1966.

[33] Brown 194, n. 14.

[34] Thomas, "Probings" 31.

[35] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 40.

[36] Thomas, "Lethbridge" 50, 56.

[37] R. S. Thomas, interview, 19 Sept. 1976, quoted in Sandra Anstey, "A Study of R.S. Thomas's Literary Achievement, with a Full Bibliography," diss., U of Wales, Swansea, 1981, 179.

[38] R. Towler and A. P. M. Coxon, The Fate of the Anglican Clergy: A Sociological Study (London: Macmillan, 1979) 130.

[39] See "On the threshold of middle age" (ERS), "The end of a peninsula" (ERS), and Thomas's comments in Wilson 39.

[40] R. S. Thomas, "The Making of a Poem," Selected Prose 115.

[41] R. S. Thomas, "To Church," Poetry 100 (1962): 81-82.

[42] Thomas, "Priest and Poet" 55.

[43] P. Stanwood, "Time and Liturgy in Donne, Crashaw, and T. S. Eliot," Liturgy and Literature, ed. J. Wortley (Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 1979) 92.

[44] Margaret Visser, The Rituals of Dinner (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1991) 24.

[45] R. S. Thomas, "Vocation," Poetry Wales 6.1 (1970): 37-38.

[46] Thomas, "Priest and Poet" 53.

[47] The style of "A will of iron" (ERS) resembles that of an entry in Markings for 1941-42:

> He stood erect--as a peg-top does so long as the whip keeps lashing it. He was modest--thanks to a robust conviction of his own superiority. He was unambitious--all he wanted was a life free from cares, and he took more pleasure in the failures of others than in his own successes. He saved his life by never risking it--and complained that he was misunderstood (Dag Hammerskjöld, Markings, trans. W. H. Auden and Leif Sjöberg [London: Faber, 1964] 34).

Both self-assessments share an undercutting paradox (Thomas's poem begins: "A will of iron, perforated / by indeci-

sion"), a sardonic, self-despising wit, and a distancing device of writing about oneself in the third person.

[48] The mast as an emblem of the cross is very old. J. A. W. Bennett traces it back to the second century and points out examples in mediaeval drama and in Donne's "The Cross" in The Poetry of the Passion: Studies in Twelve Centuries of English Verse (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982) 225, n. 12.

[49] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Defense of Poetry," English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, 1967) 1087.

[50] A third possible source is the Renaissance conception of the poet as priest, seen in Milton's "Elegy VI": "Diis etenim sacer est vates, divumque sacerdos," which Hughes translates as "For truly, the bard is sacred to the gods and is their priest" (52, l. 77). In "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," Milton sees himself as a prophet, his lips touched, like Isaiah's, "with hallow'd fire" by the "Heav'nly Muse" (42, ll. 28, 15).

[51] James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (New York: Viking, 1956) 221.

[52] Seamus Heaney, Selected Poems: 1965-75 (London: Faber, 1980) 30.

[53] David Jones, "Art and Sacrament," Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings, ed. H. Grisewood (London: Faber, 1959) 163, 167, 173-4.

[54] William Noon, Poetry and Prayer (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1967) 60.

[55] Dom Cuthbert Butler, quoted in A. A. Brockington, Mysticism and Poetry: On a Basis of Experience (1934; Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat, 1970) 13.

[56] Søren Kierkegaard, quoted by Perry D. LeFevre in his concluding essay in Søren Kierkegaard, The Prayers of Kierkegaard, ed. LeFevre (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1956) 214.

[57] A late poem, "Hear me" (ERS), makes the point that it is after such egotistic prayer has ended that, sometimes, "in the silence between / prayers," one can perceive self-sacrificing love "at the world's centre." It is necessary to pay attention to the silence to find God.

[58] Ralph Townsend, Faith, Prayer and Devotion (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) 35.

[59] A. M. Allchin, "Emerging: a Look at Some of R. S. Thomas' More Recent Poems," Theology 81 (1978): 354.

[60] Fritjof Capra, The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism, 2nd ed. (Boston: New Science Library-Shambhala, 1985) 37-38.

[61] The theatre imagery reminds one of Herrick's "Good Friday: Rex Tragicus, or Christ going to His Crosse," in which Christ is portrayed as a tragic actor.

[62] Roland Mathias, "Philosophy and Religion in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas," Poetry Wales 7.4 (1972): 32.

[63] Townsend 51.

[64] John Bunyan, quoted in A. Tindal Hart, The Country Priest in English History (London: Phoenix House, 1959) 26-27.

[65] Anthony Nuttal, Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante, and St. John (London: Methuen, 1980) 18.

[66] J. P. Ward makes a similar observation when he says that Thomas's "everyday apprehension of the world is . . . couched in one bodily mode . . . strongly; namely, the act of seeing. Seeing, even staring, has never been far from Thomas's way of understanding the world" (The Poetry of R. S. Thomas [Bridgend: Poetry Wales, 1987] 102).

[67] Wilson 69.

[68] Brown 164.

[69] R. S. Thomas, "Vocation," Poetry Wales 14.4 (1970): 37-38.

# CHAPTER SIX

## "God of Form and Number": Science in Thomas's Religious Poetry

From his first published volume in 1946, Stones of the Field, Thomas has engaged in his poetry with the language and concepts of modern science. At first, references to science are scattered, but after the change of subject that took place around 1970, the engagement with science becomes a dominant theme, along with the search for God. For Thomas, the two are intimately connected since the search for knowledge and experience of God takes place in a physical world that science teaches humanity to understand. Science serves both as a source of images and metaphors for the poetry of religious search and as a subject in itself, which the poet struggles to understand and about which he makes judgements as a priest-poet. The poetry shows an ambivalent attitude towards science, which can be related to the kind of science the poet is discussing. When Thomas is skeptical and critical, he is most often referring to what Fritjof Capra calls the old paradigm of science, derived from the Cartesian-Newtonian world-view with its reductionism and mechanism, and to applied science with its links to technology, capitalism, and nuclear and other weapons. His more affirmative attitude to science is often associated with the new, more holistic paradigm of science, derived from the world revealed by relativity and quantum mechanics, and with "pure science," animated by the desire to understand how the world works. Thomas's attempts to integrate the language and concepts of the new science into his poetry and his religious vision point an important direction for modern Christian poetry.

That a poet should engage with science in his or her work is not surprising, and can even be seen as traditional. Geoffrey Chaucer, John Donne, John Milton, James Thomson, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and, in a different vein, William Blake and Alfred Lord Tennyson are among poets who displayed in their poetry a lively interest in the science of their day. A modern poet, however, faces problems that his predecessors did not. Scientific knowledge has expanded so greatly and become so specialised that even scientists cannot keep up with it all. Much of it is very difficult for a non-specialist to grasp. Moreover, the new understanding of the universe embodied in such fields as cosmology, particle physics, and astronomy seems both to contradict one's everyday experience of life and to reach beyond the power of the

imagination to grasp. How can the solidity of objects be only apparent? How can one imaginatively grasp the extremes of time and space measurement, the smallness of $1 \times 10^{-35}$ seconds (cosmologists theorise about the condition of the universe at such a time after the Big Bang[1]), or the enormity of 20 billion light-years, the distance to the farthest object astronomers have detected?[2]

The poet who would employ scientific understanding in his or her work faces potentially daunting problems, but is assisted by the existence of resources in the media that mediate scientific concepts to the general public. Scientific discoveries are reported on and explained in newscasts, newsmagazines, science columns in newspapers, and popular science magazines; on science programs on radio and television; and in books aimed at a general audience. Examples of the last are the volumes of science essays by Stephen Jay Gould and Lewis Thomas and books explaining the modern understanding of the universe, such as those written by such eminent British scientists as Sir Arthur Eddington, Sir James Jeans, Stephen Hawking, and Paul Davies. Science fiction, a popular modern form of literature, cinema, and television, also participates in educating the public and familiarising them with scientific vocabulary, concepts, and theories. The very popular Star Trek television series and movies, for example, refer to such esoteric concepts as wormholes, cosmic strings, time loops, and anti-matter.

This very familiarity provides Thomas with a reason for his deliberate attempt to incorporate more scientific material into his later work. In his prose writings, Thomas is at first skeptical of the possibility of a successful meeting of poetry and science, in part because of his Romantic view of poetry and his old paradigmatic view of science. As outlined by physicist Fritjof Capra, the old Newtonian or Cartesian paradigm focused on the part and its properties as the key to understanding the whole and on fundamental structures that interact through various forces and mechanisms to produce processes. The physical world of objects and forces exists outside of and independent of the observer and the process of observation, so that both of the latter are objective. Knowledge is metaphorically a building, with "fundamental laws" and "basic building blocks," and scientific truths can be known with "absolute and final certainty."[3] Capra connects this paradigm with such qualities as rational, linear, and self-assertive thinking, analysis, mechanism, and reductionism.[4]

In a 1963 lecture, "Words and the Poet," Thomas recognises that the poet now speaks to an urban, industrialised audience whose world comprises both objects with "new, often technical names" and "new knowledge, with its accompanying vocabulary." He acknowledges that poetry can theoretically be made with the new scientific and technological vocabu-

lary. Yet he remains skeptical, on grounds both practical ("'Where are the poems?'") and theoretical, quoting Coleridge's view that poetry and science are opposed. Thomas ends with an appeal to the Romantic function of the poet, which is "to speak to our condition in the name of our common humanity in words which do not grow old because the heart does not grow old."[5] By implication, the new words cannot speak to the heart. "A Frame for Poetry" (1966) also opposes science to poetry, speculating on the connexion between the decline of poetry and the ascendancy of science. With the latter he associates "a mechanized and impersonal age, an analytic and clinical one," hiding "the starved heart and the uneasy spirit" under a veneer of affluence. The adjectives describing the age are characteristic of the old scientific paradigm. Such a science cannot nourish poetry: it weakens "that creative tension of the intellect and the emotions" that gives rise to "the good poem."[6]

By the 1970s, Thomas has changed his mind. Though he still doubts that English poetry can ever successfully incorporate "technical terms," as he told a Welsh audience in 1977,[7] he himself is using more scientific vocabulary and concepts as a deliberate poetic programme. In a 1978 interview, he declares that, because "the science experience" has become a part of life, the poet must "find a place for it," presumably in his work and his vision. Science and poetry are no longer inimical. "I am trying," he tells the interviewer, "to see if there isn't some median between science and poetry, and religion for that matter too. . . . I am trying to approach religion along scientific lines as it were,"[8] that is, trying to merge insights of the two. In a 1990 interview, he explains his motivation further:

> The reason I have tried to write poems containing scientific images and which show some knowledge of the nature of science, is because, owing to the enormous part science and technology play in our lives, a divorce of poetry from them would be injurious to the development of poetry and would alienate people from it, as has already occurred to some degree. Science and technology are concerned with vital areas of man's concern, they are therefore taken seriously. So still is religion. The danger to poetry is that it should become a fringe activity. . . . What are we to make of a poetry that cannot embrace some scientific knowledge and that is incapable of using words which are daily on the lips of a growing section of the population?[9]

Poetry and religion must engage with science if they are to remain relevant to modern people. In his own verse, "as far

as I have understood astronomy, relativity theory and nuclear physics, I have found images in poetry."[10]

Thomas's change of heart is related, I believe, to his growing knowledge of "the new physics" and of the new scientific paradigm that has grown out of the astonishing discoveries of modern science, especially in astronomy and physics. From them have come the quantum theory, which relates to the subatomic world, and the theories of relativity, which relate to the larger world. Capra describes the new paradigm as holistic and ecological. It focuses on the whole rather than the parts; their properties can be understood only in reference to the dynamic web of relationships that is the whole. A part is ultimately "merely a pattern" in this web and a structure is "the manifestation of an underlying process." The human observer is also an inextricable part of the fluid web of the world and thus objective observation is impossible. Epistemology must be explicitly stated in any description of scientific knowledge. The network has replaced the building as the metaphor for knowledge, and scientific knowledge itself is "limited and approximate," never absolute: "science can never provide any complete and definitive understanding of reality."[11] Capra connects this paradigm with intuitive, non-linear thinking, synthesis, integration, and holism.[12]

It is easy to see how this model of science would appeal to a poet already interested in ecology, mystical apprehension, and ultimate unity of vision, and opposed to mechanism, materialism, and reductionism. A writer need not have read scientific works to be influenced by the ideas of the new science; as Katherine Hayles has pointed out, such ideas are part of the "field of culture" in which writers work.[13] Thomas, however, has deliberately sought to keep abreast of scientific advances, partly by reading the popular works of scientists like Capra, Paul Davies, and James Lovelock, three names he specifically mentions.[14] Capra's The Tao of Physics (1976) explores parallels between modern physics and Eastern mysticism; Paul Davies is prominent in the exposition of the new physics (The Runaway Universe [1978] and Other Worlds [1980] among others) and the exploration of the interface between physics and a broadly-defined theology (God and the New Physics [1983], The Mind of God [1992]); and James Lovelock's Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth (1979) postulates that the entire planet is a vast, unified ecosystem, a living organism. The new paradigm is embodied in their works.

## Images and Metaphors for Poetry

From the earliest volumes, Thomas's poetry draws on the sciences for images and metaphors. The scientific disciplines that serve as poetic sources include not just astron-

omy and physics, but also geology, biology, medicine, anthropology (in its study of human evolution), archaeology, chemistry, and mathematics. Thomas employs his metaphors and images for the most part with naturalness and ease, not as simple ornaments but as illuminators of a deeper connection between the worlds of science and spirit. Like myth, metaphors for God serve as a way of exploring conceptions of God and the human experience of God. In this section I shall examine Thomas's use of scientific metaphors and images in regard to two dominant themes of his religious poetry: the nature of God and the search for God.

1. The Nature of God

In several poems, Thomas presents God as a research scientist, experimenting on the natural world and its creatures. In "Dialogue" (LS), God directs the slow process of human evolution, which has so far produced an imperfect being. Now it is not bone but "'the chemistry / of the spirit'" that needs attention, and God the research chemist announces his intention to "'experiment'" with the stubborn human heart "'a little longer in / the crucible of the adult mind.'" "Pre-Cambrian" (F) describes the sea as an insane asylum for "the failed experiments God put away," implying that God is a sinister figure, a mad scientist or at least an incompetent one. The metaphor of God as research scientist links God causally with the evolution of life but also, in these poems, implies a fallible being of limited knowledge, one whose relation with the life on which he experiments is ambiguous.

God operates also through a biological process associated with evolution, that is, mutation. In "Adjustments" (F), God is "an unseen / power, whose sphere is the cell / and the electron." At the microscopic and subatomic levels, God makes the small "amendments" or mutations that carry evolutionary change. The scientific process is used not only to describe the method of God's intervention in the physical universe but to suggest by analogy his actions in the human realm: one is to pray "for more loving / mutations" of the human spirit.

Thomas draws on astronomy, too, for descriptions of God. Earlier I discussed the image of God associated with the darkness between the stars in "Via Negativa (H) and "The Possession"(F). In "Cones" (EA), God's presence at the spiritual heart of the universe is expressed in the implicit metaphor of a double star: the seekers hope to reach

> the still
> centre, where love operates
> on all those frequencies
> that are set up by the spinning

of two minds, the one on the other.

The divine mind and the human mind, inseparably united in action, create the energy needed for love to act. The stellar metaphor expresses a truth about the dynamics of the relationship between the human and the divine.

"An obsession with nothing" (ERS) compares love to the stars "in the velocity of their recession," a metaphor repeated in "The church is small": "the endlessness" of God's "recessions / are brought up short by / the contemporaneity of the Cross." The conclusion of "Bleak Liturgies" also juxtaposes the God whose "white flag // is a star receding from us / at light's speed" and the Crucified Christ. The stars and galaxies recede at enormous speed because the universe is expanding. The astronomical metaphor expresses the poet's persistent sense of an elusive God who cannot be overtaken by the seeker, who is by nature impossibly and increasingly remote. There are two points at which the new physics touches this understanding of God. First, ultimate reality or God, especially a God who is receding, cannot be known or articulated completely, nor can a dynamic physical reality in the new paradigm.[15] Second, the experience of God as at once impersonal and personal, absent and present, the receding God and the suffering God on the Cross, an understanding discussed in Chapter Four, resembles the understanding in the new physics of light and electrons as both waves and particles, and of subatomic particles as both present and absent. Paradox is an intrinsic part of the subatomic world as of the religious one, and polarities are subsumed in a larger unity that transcends them, as Capra demonstrates.[16] One can extend this parallel to the other dichotomies in Thomas's religious poetry, for example, the way of negation and the way of affirmation, and see them as opposites that are part of a larger unity.

Mathematics and geometry[17] provide a fertile source of metaphors for and images of God. The connection between these sciences and divinity is ancient. Among the classical Greeks, mathematical relationships and geometric forms were intrinsic to the structure of the cosmos. Pythagoras believed that numbers had mystical power and significance and that "the nature of things . . . is geometrical structure or form."[18] The universe conceived by Pythagoras and later Ptolemy exhibited geometrical and numerical perfection: the celestial bodies were perfect spheres, moving with dignity and harmony in perfectly circular orbits.[19] The Pythagorians and Plato both placed numbers and geometrical shapes in the eternal, unchanging world of the Ideal. Mathematics and geometry were associated with order, beauty, reality, and the transcendent; in Western tradition, all of these are associated with God.

It is a short step then for God to become known as a geometer and a mathematician. In early seventeenth-century

thought, according to Marjorie Nicolson, God "was a 'skillful Geometrician' whose nature was to express Himself mathematically."[20] Galileo wrote that the physical universe was a book "'written in mathematical language, and the letters are triangles, circles and other geometrical figures, without which means it is humanly impossible to comprehend a single word.'"[21] As author of the book, God is implicitly a mathematician and geometer, and to understand nature, one must master those two disciplines. Another great astronomer and Galileo's contemporary, Johannes Kepler, wrote that "'Geometry is co-eternal with the mind of God,'" providing the pattern for creation. In fact, "'Geometry is God Himself.'"[22] One thinks of Blake's drawing "The Ancient of Days," depicting a kneeling God with a pair of calipers, laying out the world.

When the universe came to be seen as a machine, God the Clock-maker largely replaced God the Geometer or mathematician, but the latter description has been used in the twentieth century by British astronomer Sir James Jeans. As R. G. Collingwood explains, Jeans believed that nature depends upon an immaterial reality composed of mathematical forms, and that the God who thinks these forms is "a geometrician-God."[23] Modern science still maintains that mathematics is "the language of nature itself," an expression of its underlying order, according to mathematical physicist, Paul Davies.[24] When Thomas speaks of the numerical and geometrical structure of nature, or of God as a mathematician, then, he draws on a tradition with both ancient and modern forms.

Thomas's awareness of the mathematical and geometrical structure of the physical world is evident in his use of "starry equations" for the night sky in "Cadenza" (LP) or "the geometry of their dark wings" as a description of the airborne swifts in "Swifts" (P). More than simply employing this sort of metaphor to describe nature, however, he is concerned to relate such descriptions to a God "whose nature [is] to express himself mathematically." In five important poems from Laboratories of the Spirit and Frequencies, Thomas explores God as the God of mathematics and geometry, but reveals ambivalent feelings about such a metaphor.

The first poem is "Emerging" (LS), discussed earlier as a prayer-poem. In his description of the mystical prayer of union, the poet speaks of "emerging / from the adolescence of nature," that is, a dependence on the concrete and sensual, "into the adult geometry / of the mind." In this evolutionary image, "geometry of the mind" represents maturity and the power of abstract thought. In this state, "I begin to recognize / you anew, God of form and number." A God of form and number is a God of geometry and mathematics, and thus a God of science, a traditional understanding of God "recognized anew" and re-presented by the poet. In keeping with this God of science, the human journey leads

not to the City of God but to "the tall city / of glass that is the laboratory of the spirit," a scientific image for spiritual transformation. Implicitly, God is again a scientist but a benevolent one. The poem represents a significant affirmative view of science within the spiritual life.

"Mediations" (LS) and "Dialectic" (F) expand on the affirmative understanding of a God of geometry and mathematics. In the former poem, God presents the physical world, both macrocosmic and subatomic, as a mediation of divine presence and one of three pathways to God:

> And to one God says: Come
> to me by numbers and
> figures; see my beauty
> in the angles between
> stars, in the equations
> of my kingdom. Bring
> your lenses to the worship
> of my dimensions: far
> out and far in, there
> is always more of me
> in proportion.

One notes that six key nouns come from mathematics and geometry: "numbers," "figures," "angles," "equations," "dimensions," and "proportion." The physical world presents itself not through the senses but through measurement. The terms chosen are not highly technical, but simple, in keeping with the theme of divine accessibility.

Indeed, Thomas's scientific vocabulary is rarely highly specialised and then only in a few late poems: the Doppler effect in "Fugue for Ann Griffiths" (WA); in The Echoes Return Slow, the Second Law of Thermodynamics, "[homo] habilis" and "[homo] erectus," "nictitating membrane," and "helix"; and in "Bleak Liturgies," "leptons" and "quarks." All of these terms, except the membrane, habilis, and leptons, may at least be known to an educated reader, if not understood. Thomas's common scientific vocabulary contrasts favourably with the highly technical, abstruse vocabulary employed by Hugh MacDiarmid, a Scottish poet much admired by Thomas, who also set out to include science in poetry. MacDiarmid was guilty of such monstrosities as

> Veiled allelomorphic transitions such as liquid
> helium
> Exhibits around a certain low temperature,
> Simple numerical multiples of the Riemannian ζ
> function,[25]

which few readers have any hope of understanding. As Wordsworth wisely said in his preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads,

> The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings.[26]

"Veiled allelomorphic transitions" and "Riemannian ζ functions" are hardly "familiar to us."

In "Mediations," one also notes the link between beauty and mathematics and geometry, a link both ancient and modern. Plato, for example, believed that equations and geometrical forms were beautiful in an absolute sense,[27] while many modern scientists seek and admire beauty and elegance in mathematics. The physicist and Nobel Prize winner Leon Lederman has said that for many scientists, the beauty of a given mathematics is a sign of its truth,[28] while Cambridge mathematician R. A. Herman was known for praising quality, beauty, and elegance in mathematics.[29]

The second poem, "Dialectic," presents mathematical equations as the successor to verbal language in humanity's communication with God. Mathematics is a form of prayer: "They are speaking to me still," God says, "in the geometry / I delight in, in the figures / that beget more figures." "Figures" concisely refers to both geometry and mathematics, while the biblical "beget" humorously links the multiplying figures with the human generations. God clearly admires fruitfulness. God's answer to the prayer of mathematics includes lines shaped by the new physics and relativity theory: by mixing space and time language, the poem ingeniously expresses that theory's insight that space and time form one, inseparable, four-dimensional reality, "space-time." God declares that he will show the scientists "space that is bounded / but without end." Thomas is employing a new model of the universe that sees it as a "hypersphere," a mathematical term for a space (like a balloon) that has a finite volume but no edge.[30] "Without end" can refer both to time and space, reflecting their interchangeability. God goes on to describe "time that is where / they were or will be; the eternity / that is here for me and for them / there": time (and its antithesis, eternity) is a place and "were or will be" may suggest a non-linear view of time that sees it as a whole. The poem ends with an image that merges evolution and birth: the truth that is "born with" the scientists (Thomas cannot resist a pun on "labour") will be discarded "like some afterbirth of the spirit." The image promises an evolution towards a higher or more exact truth, to which the simile gives spiritual overtones.

These poems view an understanding of God as a God of mathematics and geometry affirmatively. The last two poems do not. "The Game" reflects the anxiety created when the certainty of the old commonsensical Newtonian universe and its mathematics is replaced by the uncertainty intrinsic to the world of quantum mechanics and modern mathematics, a world that seems contradictory to common sense and ordinary experience. The uncertainty inherent in the subatomic world is expressed in Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which states that one cannot know both the position and the velocity of a subatomic particle with equal precision at the same moment. Measuring one affects the other, and so there is an inherent limit to knowledge. There is surprisingly a similar uncertainty in mathematics: Gödel's Theorem demonstrates that there are undecidable propositions and Gregory Chaitrin has shown that "randomness pervades all mathematics, including arithmetic."[31] Part of the new understanding of the universe is certain concepts that defy the visual imagination but that can be handled with abstract mathematics. A hypersphere, writes Davies confidently, "is hard to imagine but mathematically perfectly well defined and understood."[32]

The God of "The Game" is the gleeful God of this seemingly impossible, quixotic world, in which life is an unfair game forced on unwilling participants. Like the world, God seems unpredictable and illogical: he is "not serious in / his conclusions," and his mathematics is whimsical and illogical: "Take this / from that, . . . and there is everything / left." He seems responsible for the players' feelings of alienation from the reality of the world they inhabit. The image of looking over the edge of the cosmos to see one's own face looking back, "as it does / in a pool" (an allusion to Narcissus), reflects the sense that in the modern scientific picture of the world, as Hannah Arendt writes, measuring instruments (and so mathematics) have replaced the senses as revealers of reality, so that "instead of nature or the universe--in the words of Heisenberg--man encounters only himself."[33] In such a situation, only the mathematicians are happy, because they are used to dealing with abstractions, paradoxes, and impossibilities:

> Never mind, they
> say, whether it is there
> or not, so long as our like
> can use it. And we are shattered
> by their deductions.

Thomas gives the example of a mathematical series for which the rules of its existence are built on the impossibility of its existence. The poem goes on to find injustice as well as uncertainty within human life, but it is the picture of a God of impossibilities and illogical mathematics that I wish to emphasise here.

The most chilling picture of the God of mathematics and geometry occurs in the final poem, "At It." Unlike the God of "Mediations" or "Dialectics," this God is described solely by mathematics. Though "he" sits at a table and writes, he is in every other respect non-human, occupying an invisible world abstracted from the ordinary world of experience. This alienation is indicated by Thomas's opening image:

> I think he sits at that strange table
> of Eddington's, that is not a table
> at all, but nodes and molecules
> pushing against molecules
> and nodes. . . .

Eddington's table is described in the introduction to his 1927 Gifford Lectures, published as The Nature of the Physical World. Eddington contrasts the seemingly solid and real table in his study, at which he is writing, with the same table as understood by science, an insubstantial entity composed mostly of empty space and speeding electrical charges, which is nevertheless the "real" table.[34] Thomas's use of chiasmus, "nodes and molecules"/"molecules and nodes," mimics the contrary forces the lines describe.

Sitting at this insubstantial table, God, like Eddington, is writing, but he employs "invisible handwriting," and he is writing, not words, but a code, the genetic code. His face is not human but a clock face: the dead metaphor is resuscitated and annihilates the human resonance of "face." The time on the clock is an eternal now, which includes both past and future. Thomas's reference to Greece and Egypt, pinnacles of human civilisation, emphasises the gap between the realm of the human and the reality inhabited by this God.

Having presented this non-human God of scientific reality, the poet suddenly turns and confronts him on the very subject of his lack of humanity. The tone becomes angry, not calm, the rhythm emphatic, not measured, the vocabulary emotional, not rational or technical, and the allusions biblical, not scientific. The poet imagines himself challenging "this God" at the last judgement, "storming at him, / as Job stormed, with the eloquence / of the abused heart." Yet his outburst is brief and the confrontation remains imaginary, for there will not be a judgement as traditionally understood, and God will not come down to answer him, or even to put him in his place, as the biblical God did to Job. The poem quietly reasserts its initial tone, rhythm, and vocabulary, underlining this God's utter indifference to the human, his lack of compassion or a concern for justice or ethics. His only verdict proceeds from "his calculations, that abstruse / geometry that proceeds eternally / in the silence beyond right and wrong." In this

poem, Thomas questions the adequacy of a strictly impersonal, non-human, amoral conception of God, reflecting only a certain scientific and mathematical world-view, to answer the human desire for love, compassion, communion, and justice from God. By placing "At It" across the page from "The Woman," a myth-poem with an anthropomorphic God, Thomas suggests that he is exploring possible or partial conceptions of God, not absolutes. In the affirmative poem "Dialectic," nine pages after "At It," God is presented as a personal God of mathematics, not a mathematical God.

## 2. The Search for God and for Understanding

Another major theme in Thomas's religious poetry is the search for knowledge, especially knowledge of God. The central idea of search is also expressed in terms of the journey and prayer, which are treated in certain poems with images and metaphors drawn from science. These poems nearly all occur in Frequencies or subsequent volumes; that is, they have been published since 1978, during a time when Thomas has been particularly interested in scientific developments and in the parallels between science and theology. As with the use of scientific metaphors and images for God, Thomas implies a relation between the scientific and the spiritual, which is in these poems a harmonious one.

The journey, itself a metaphor for life and for search (as discussed in Chapter One), is frequently described in terms taken from astronomy and space travel. The speaker in "Pluperfect" (BHN) expresses his feeling of frustration and meaninglessness in Einsteinian terms: "In curved / space I kept on arriving / at my departures," an endless circular path that brings no new insight. The aging speaker in "The New Mariner" (BHN) is a spiritual astronomer, sending out "probes" into the "God-space." Then, feeling poised between two voids, outer and inner space, he becomes an "astronaut / on impossible journeys / to the far side of the self," from which he receives signals (as from extraterrestial beings) and from which he brings home incomprehensible coded messages. Like the Ancient Mariner of Coleridge's poem, the New Mariner feels compelled to tell others of his experiences, but the poem implies that the positivist "passer-by, hot on his way / to the marriage of plain fact with plain fact," will not be receptive. The mirroring of outer space within the self adds mystery and the sense of infinite depth to the self, in contrast to a reductionist view of humanity. Such mirroring also implies a unity betweeen inner and outer worlds. The location of the signals within suggests that God is to be sought for in internal reality, while the coded messages express his elusiveness and incomprehensibility. The poem reinterprets Christ's statement that "the Kingdom of God is within you" in terms of astronomy and complements

poems like "Night Sky," which place God and the signals in the depths of space.

In contrast, interior space and the journey through it is imaged geologically in "Inside" (LP), which begins, "I am my own / geology." The poem cunningly represents the speaker's mind as a rock formation, long hardened and "honeycombed" by the draining away of thought, with ideas imaged as rigid stalagmites and stalactites. One follows narrowing passages to a low, cold chamber that is "where I think." The long loose sentence, which unrolls in short phrases over eight lines, mimics the slow journey inward. The metaphor, extending throughout the poem, unifies it and clothes the intangible in vivid concrete form.

The silence and emptiness of space provide a natural setting for images of prayer as an attempt to reach a God whose own silence and absence are mirrored in the vacancy. Thomas frequently describes such prayers as "probes": "the prayer probes / have been launched and silence / closes behind them" ("Bleak Liturgies"). His folded hands are the launching pad for the probes in "Night after night" (ERS), from which they "take off for their orbiting / in immense space," though in "He is his own spy" (ERS), the prayers orbit "the wrong throne." Other poems use the metaphor of electromagnetic waves rather than probes. In "One Way" (BHN), the speaker calls to God, "signalling to him on the frequencies / I commanded," but God's "station" always "remained closed." "The Tree" (LP), which contrasts the green tree of the living God with the modern steel tree of technology set up in its place, says that because of the steel tree, God "has taken himself / off out of the reach / of our transmitted prayers." The poem employs the metaphor of the radio-telescope, which scientists use both to send signals from earth to any intelligent life in the cosmos and to search for signals from such life. "Nightly / we explore the universe / on our wave-lengths," the poem concludes, finding only "acoustic ghosts" that may or may not be "immortal mind communicating with itself." Like mathematics, radio-telescopy is both a method to gaining scientific knowledge and a kind of prayer.

## Science as Subject

Thus far, I have examined Thomas's images and metaphors drawn from science in the description of non-scientific, mostly religious subjects. Though at times the poems combine science as metaphor and science as subject, as for example, "Mediations" combines the metaphor of God the mathematician with the literal idea of science as a path to God, the emphasis in the poems cited has been on the non-scientific subject. Now it is time to turn to those poems that treat science and scientific ideas directly. First will come those

poems that show a critical or questioning attitude to science: these reflect a response to the old paradigm of science, to applied science, or to new understandings that trouble the poet. Then will come those poems that show an affirmative and holistic response to science.

1. Poet as Critic and Questioner

The figure of the scientist appears in a dozen Thomas poems, and in two-thirds of them, he, or rather they, for disreputable scientists always occur in the plural in Thomas, are sinister, anonymous figures, usually white-coated in a laboratory. They are always seen from the outside, in the third person, and are opposed to life and the spirit. The scientists in "Those Times" (WI) "worked away / with their needles, a shroud for the spirit," while those in "Repeat" (H), engaged with "the mazes / Of their calculations," will eventually come for God to crucify him again. The scientists in "I have waited" (ERS) are seen "plotting the future" (a clever pun) by the speaker, who puts a cross at the bottom of their calculations "to / prove to them that they were wrong."

When the scientist is an evil figure, however, it is most often because he is a reductionist, like the sewing scientists above, or an applied scientist, working on the devices of war, especially nuclear weapons. Thomas has said, "It is of applied science as manifest in technology that I am suspicious with its reductionist tendencies, and positively dislike its prostitution to the money power."[35] The scientists in "Adagio" (LP) are "white-collared / men at their dark trades," casting sharp shadows. The "cold radiance" of their laboratories suggests radiation, and the poet describes them biblically as lepers, running through "the corridors of our culture," with the potential to destroy us. In "Bequest" (EA), a poem about the nuclear arms race, they work in "poison factories," presiding over "a clandestine ritual" in their "vestments," their "white coats." The metaphor of these scientists as priests in a new religion is developed further in "Ritual" (EA), which begins enigmatically, like an Anglo-Saxon riddle. The speaker appears to be, oddly enough, verbal language personified. This language relates that the priests who buried it

> have exchanged
> their vestments for white coats,
> working away in their bookless
> laboratories, ministrants
> in that ritual beyond words
> which is the Last Sacrament of the species.

The scientists have buried verbal language because they employ the abstract language of mathematics in their "ritual." Thomas has developed the observation that science is the religion of the modern age by relating its research to the Eucharist, although he does not suggest any deeper implications of the analogy, using it in a superficial way. The last line suggests that the species is about to die, which in turn suggests that the research is probably related to nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, although, by not being specific, Thomas allows the ritual to represent any research dangerous to human physical and spiritual welfare.

"The Hearth" (H) draws on a different religious metaphor to describe scientists, with politicians, as "travellers / To a new Bethlehem," the new Magi "with their hands full / Of the gifts that destroy." (Christian tradition makes the Magi astronomers.) One remembers that Thomas also uses the Nativity metaphor in describing how modern culture has substituted the machine for the Christ child in the manger (discussed in Chapter 2). Both of these uses draw on Yeats's "Second Coming," with its new birth at Bethlehem. Like "the Last Sacrament of the species," "The gifts that destroy" is capable of a wide interpretation. The poem is not pessimistic, however, because it counters the dark portrait of the new magi, "the victims of time," in the last five-and-a-half lines with the warm portrait of the lovers in the first six-and-a-half lines, resident in "intervals" of eternity "that our love / Widens." The point of view of the poem remains with the lovers; this fact and the emotional strength behind their description makes the hope that they represent dominate the pessimism associated with the deadly scientists.

An important part of science is the scientific method, a rational, analytical approach based on observation and measurement. One learns about the whole by breaking it down into parts, and the whole is the sum of those parts. One also strives for objectivity, the separation of oneself from the object of one's study. This method and thinking, as Capra has said, is characteristic of the old paradigm.

Nearly a dozen poems speak of scientific observation as a way of knowing, through the use of the lens. Technologically-aided sight, through microscopes and telescopes, has plumbed the depths of matter and space in the search for knowledge and for God, but the poet sees no joy in the results. Lenses destroy the human sense of perspective in "The Earth" (H) and "Hebrews 12:29" (EA), creating pride and scorn. The latter poem asks forgiveness for "the contempt our lenses / breed in us. To be brought near / stars and microbes does us no good." Lenses create fear, not an inflated sense of self-importance, in "Observation" (BHN): God wonders, why are people "appalled . . . / at the appetite / of their lenses?" In "Probing" (LS) the fear is mixed

with a feeling of imprisonment. Humanity is caught in an unending "nightmare," which is "intellectual": "we never awaken / from the compulsiveness of the mind's / stare into the lenses' furious interiors." The microscopic world is appalling, perhaps because of its teeming populations of viruses, bacteria, and other minute creatures. The mind becomes addicted to the intellectual knowledge gained by such observation and analysis, neglecting alternative kinds of knowledge.

These alternative ways of knowing are expressed in three lovely nature poems, which contrast an intellectual, objective, mathematical approach with one more experiential, subjective, and holistic. "The River" (H) begins with a sensuous description of the stream, with its "cobbled water" and its speckled trout, "silently singing among the weed's / Branches." The poet then declares,

> I bring the heart
> Not the mind to the interpretation
> Of their music, letting the stream
> Comb me, feeling it fresh
> In my veins. . . .

The kind of knowledge he gains of the trout is imaginative, affective, and subjective. The image is that of union, so that the knowledge is gained from the inside, from experience within. Similarly, "Swifts" (P) presents a vivid picture of the swifts in flight and then concludes, "I am learning to bring / Only my wonder to the contemplation / Of the geometry of their dark wings."

"The Place" (NBF) is more explicit in its contrast. Watching the martins fly in the sunshine about his house, the poet contrasts his method of observation with that of the "man vowed / To science." ("Vowed" suggests again that science is a religion.) The scientist measures; he counts the number of times the birds return to the\ rafters, analyses their droppings, records "the wave-length / Of their screaming." Through his analysis and figures, he gains an objective knowledge of the birds. The poet, on the other hand, opts for an integration of himself and the martins:

> my method is so
> To have them about myself
> Through the hours of this brief
> Season and to fill with their
> Movement, that it is I they build
> In and bring up their young
> To return to after the bitter
> Migrations, knowing the site
> Inviolate through its outward changes.

The poet makes a commitment to the birds, and his relationship with them, as with the river, the trout, and the swifts, is one of love. He knows them subjectively, from inner experience. These three poems do not indicate that their imaginative, integrative, holistic approach to knowledge is similar to an alternative scientific approach. They were written well before the works of Capra, Davies, and Lovelock were published, and it is likely that Thomas did not at the time know of the alternative new paradigmatic approach to knowledge, which complements the rational approach. In his 1985 lecture "Unity," he indicates that he learned from The Tao of Physics, published in 1976, about the need for "imagination, intuition, and a mystical attitude" if one is to understand the mysteries of the universe.[36] These poems show why the holistic approach of the new paradigm, which demolishes the separation of object and subject, has appealed so strongly to Thomas.

The acquiring of scientific knowledge is described in two poems, "Dialectic" and "The Listener in the Corner" (WI), as the slow building up of a web by the spiderlike mind, "swinging / to and fro over an abysm / of blankness" ("Dialectic"). The image deserves mention because it shows Thomas employing the main metaphor for knowledge of the new paradigm, the cosmic web of relationships. Thomas has also used the metaphor of the cosmic dance, which Hayles calls the other metaphor of the new science[37]: in "The poet scans the stars" (ERS), the chromosomes on the DNA double helix dance "to a tune from the abyss," while at the close of a 1990 interview, Thomas refers to "the dance of life against the void's backdrop."[38]

In all but one of the poems that speak of observation through lenses and in certain other poems, the scientific search for knowledge fails to find God. Although God bids the scientist in "Mediations" to "Bring / your lenses to the worship / of my dimensions," "He is his own spy" describes God as "what escapes always / the vigilance of our lenses," and "Gradual" (LP) declares that instruments are irrelevant: "I need a technique / other than that of physics // for registering the ubiquity / of your presence." In "Bleak Liturgies," whether one probes deep within the atom to the electrons and farther, to "the leptons and quarks," or seeks outward to the distant stars, one cannot catch up with God. In these poems, God is not to be found through analysis of the physical world, either because he has vacated it or because he must be approached in alternative ways.

The biological understanding of human beings, which tends to be reductionist,[39] forms all or part of the theme of three poems, published in the decade following 1972. In "No Answer" (H), the speaker describes a conversation he had with a religious friend, in which he presented the case for science against religion. The poem begins with a neurochemical explanation of thought, which reduces it to chemi-

cal interactions: "But the chemicals in / My mind were not / Ready," so the speaker keeps silent. The irony conveys the poet's attitude to such a view. Indeed, the whole poem is ironic. The speaker's argument expresses a certain modern attitude to science, of which the poet is sharply critical. Religion is rejected because it requires time and self-sacrifice, and the speaker, modern man, is interested in the way of least effort and maximum reward. He naively believes that science provides that way, and his language presents science as an alternative religion: "Give yourself / To science," he counsels, "that reveals / All, asking no pay / For it." The speaker is ignorant of the price paid, though the poet is not, and he seeks knowledge, not for itself, but for the power it will give him over nature: "The nucleus / In the atom awaits / Our bidding." One stream of Judaeo-Christian thought, based on Genesis 2, has given mankind absolute power over nature, and the desire to control nature through science and technology is characteristic of the old scientific paradigm.[40] Thomas's example is particularly ironic, given the damage done by nuclear devices and the human difficulty controlling them. The poem ends with an image from ancient history of a triumph, in which the wheels of a technological science crush art and religion.

The next two poems are both love poems to Thomas's wife. "Seventieth Birthday" (BHN) begins with a biological description of the loved one: "Made of tissue and $H_2O$, / and activated by cells / firing--" but immediately changes direction. After the stop, the poem continues, "Ah, heart, the legend / of your person!" "Heart" at once introduces feeling and relationship, which implicitly challenge the adequacy of a solely biological description of her. So do the two metaphors for her, drawn from nature, that the rest of the poem develops: the traditional romantic metaphor of the rose and the metaphor of a river: the "whitening current of your hair," carrying her away from the poet. If her "person" is a "legend," it possesses its own reality. For the poet-lover, the whole is greater than the sum of its biological parts.

"Bravo!" (F) chooses a different approach. The poet defiantly accepts a reductionist biological and psychological view of a human being, in this case himself, and aggressively commandeers scientific language in the service of love and poetry. He knows that he is not spirit but matter only, "cells and chromosomes / waiting to beget chromosomes / and cells" (chiasmus again). He knows also that he has no free will, that all his choices are determined and predictable. Given his mechanistic, materialistic nature, the poet turns to love and poetry and presents them too in scientific language. His wife is "the catalyst / of my conversions"; "conversions" has both scientific and religious overtones. Like a catalyst, his wife facilitates chemical reactions in

him, which, the poem implies, is all that love is. Moreover, his understanding is a laboratory in which the poet-scientist-lover makes songs for her that are "explosives timed / to go off in the blandness of time's face." The poem is an explosive chemical reaction, and the traditional idea in love poetry that the poem guarantees immortality to its mortal subject and so defies time is given violent treatment. This poem seems to be a defiant experiment in extending a certain scientific understanding of human beings to love and poetry.

The language of science is criticised indirectly in two poems. Since the seventeenth century and especially under the influence of the positivists, scientific language has striven for a plain, precise, objective style in which each word is univocal. In Aldous Huxley's words, "the aim of the scientist is to say only one thing at a time, and to say it unambiguously and with the greatest possible clarity."[41] This is the language of fact. "After Jericho" (F) opposes the language of fact, with its "conscript army" of constricted words, to the language of poetry, with its army of free "volunteers." Poetry wins; it is able to resist the "aggression of fact." In a very early poem, "Spring Equinox" (SF), the poet rejects various metaphorical ways of describing the sun's motion and concludes, "The age demands the facts, therefore be brief-- / Others will sense the simile-- and say: / 'We are turning towards the sun's indifferent ray.'" The statement is factually correct since it is the earth and not the sun that turns. The implicit simile may be that "we" turn like flowers towards the sun, or that the latter, though "indifferent," is still personified, but the point of the poem is that even factual language can contain hidden metaphor.

Although often critical of science, especially when it appears in opposition to religion, poetry, and human values, Thomas is sometimes more puzzled or disturbed, particularly in considering the implication of the new understanding of the universe. "The Game" is one example of such an attitude. Another is "Senior" (BHN), in which the poet is troubled, among other things, by the revelation of quantum theory that

> There is randomness
> at the centre, agitation subsisting
> at the heart of what would be
> endless peace.

The subatomic world, the heart of matter, is a world of indeterminacy and constant high-velocity movement, of particles popping into existence and then vanishing, for no apparent reason. Such a finding contradicts the metaphors of traditional mystical apprehension: Eliot's "still centre of the turning world," for example, or Wordsworth's "central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation," the

wording of which Thomas echoes. The indeterminacy of the quantum world, its lack of stability and certainty, is a source of comfort in "Bleak Liturgies," in which

> Quantum mechanics
> restores freedom to the cowed
> mind that, winking at matter,
> causes it to wink back.

(That is, the observer causes a state of reality to come into existence by the act of observing it.)

In "And this one" (ERS), the poet muses about the challenges his reading has brought to his traditional assumptions. For example, the new physics has changed his idea of the individual: given the new emphasis on process, not structure, and on a web of relationships, the individual becomes "an occasion," "an event synchronous / with other events, / not caused by them." The poet wonders,

> In a dissolving
> world what certainties
> for the self, whose identity
> is its performance?

Unlike "Senior," which found no resolution or point of rest, this poem finds its final certainty and meaning in love, which says,

> I am old now and have died
> many times, but my rebirth is surer
> than the truth embalming itself
> in the second law of your Thermo-Dynamics.

Love, with its mythic cycle of death and rebirth, is eternal and ever-renewing, whereas the universe must run steadily down and die. (The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that the amount of disorder [entropy] in the universe can only go up. It is a supreme example of linear, uni-directional time, as opposed to love's circular, cyclical time. It is also the law that C. P. Snow in his famous Rede lecture The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution said that every intelligent person should know.[42]) In this love, Thomas finds his "certainties for the self."

## 2. The Poet of Affirmation and Holism

Though he is sometimes critical, Thomas also embraces science in many of his works. One way that this acceptance is displayed is in his free use of scientific concepts; many of those drawn from relativity theory and quantum mechanics have been mentioned in the discussion thus far. Two addi-

tional concepts that have greatly influenced his imagination are concepts of time and evolution drawn especially from geology and biology. Scientific understandings of time and of the evolution of earth and of human life are evident in two dozen poems. Unidirectional and cyclical time, mentioned in the last chapter, are familiar because of their roots in human experience, but science has produced many exotic varieties of time: dilated, shortened, stopped, imaginary, relative, looped, reversible, and deep. Only the last two appear in Thomas's work. Reversible time appears in a cultural, human context in three poems, one of which is "On Hearing a Welshman Speak" (PS): "as he speaks time turns, / The swift years revolve / Backwards," like a film in reverse. Reversible time appears in a scientific context in the recent poem, "Anybody's Alphabet,"[43] in which each stanza playfully alliterates on a successive letter of the alphabet. The stanza for "p," beginning "Particle physics provides / parallels with the Upanishads" (an allusion to Capra's The Tao of Physics), defines "the present" as "that non- / point at which a paradoxical / future paves the way to the past." In quantum physics, an event in the future can cause an effect in the past, a phenomenon called "retroactive causation."[44]

Deep or geologic time, an expression of the great age of the earth, fascinates Thomas, especially as a background to geological and biological evolution. According to Moelwyn Merchant, Thomas told him that "his most vivid response to the peninsula of Llŷn [where he lives] was not to the Christian remains but to the archaeology, the geology behind them."[45] "Pre-Cambrian" begins with the poet sunning himself on the ancient rocks, thinking about deep time: "Here I think of the centuries, / six million of them, they say." Thinking of the centuries often leads naturally to the realisation of human insignificance. In "Hyddgen" (T), human beings are missing from the history recorded on the rocks by the lichen, while in "Senior," "A man's shadow falls / upon rocks that are / millions of years old," but the conjunction brings no refreshment to the restless, dissatisfied mind of the poet: "thought comes to drink at that dark / pool, but goes away thirsty," and the poem ends.

Deep time is linked with the process of geological and biological evolution, and such change over centuries, extended to include psychological, spiritual, cultural, and historical evolution, occupies Thomas in a great many poems. Creation poems like "Once" (H), "Soliloquy" (H), and "Dialogue," as I have discussed earlier, describe geological and biological evolution as an expression of God's creative activity. "Adjustments" sees this activity as ongoing through biological mutations. "One Way" relates human evolution to the development of speech, "Bent" (BHN) relates it to the development of upright posture, and "Aleph" (BHN) to the development of the mind, which emerges from Plato's

"long cave" hand in hand with eternity. "Apostrophe" (EA) describes human evolution as "their ascent by a bone / ladder to where they took off / into space-time." The ladder, like the tree, is one of the metaphors of evolution[46]; "bone ladder" vividly reminds one of the crucial role played by bones, preserved in the earth and in rocks as fossils, in the understanding of evolution. The lines also concisely combine physical, intellectual, and technological evolution.

Thomas's imagination roams freely over centuries and millenia, and he handles the long time periods involved with ease. "You have to imagine" (ERS), with its themes of time, timelessness, and evolution, provides a brief example. It uses the metaphor of an eternal being, perhaps God, whose "waiting . . . is not impatient / because it is timeless." Questions of evolutionary time ("How long / from habilis to erectus, / from the gill to the lung?") have a different meaning to such a being. Vast periods of time pass in the closing and opening of its eye: "The eye closed and the dinosaurs / were no more. It opened again / on Greece, London." The device vividly expresses two different experiences of time, both removed from the human scale: deep time and time seen from outside itself. Given that the eye takes time to open and close, the poet conveys timelessness by a comparison between the being's experience of the "time" of its existence (the time over which the eye opens and shuts) and geologic time, a comparison in which the latter seems rapid. The eye is about to close again, to open "on a planet gone under / the ice or water," with the implied extinction of life, but the being in its timeless world, for whom the stars are dew, can be disturbed neither by love nor evil. The poem shows a poet able to express imaginatively both geologic time and timelessness.

Thomas's imagination explores both past and future evolution. "Probing" is an example of the former, an archaeological poem (its original title was "Archaeology") addressed to a person whose prehistoric bones the speaker has discovered. He feels a paradoxical kind of fatherhood for the dead man, indicated in the sexual language of the opening verse paragraph: the man's grave is compared to the abdomen of a pregnant woman, implying that he is the foetus, and the speaker imagines having "entered" that grave, a word Thomas uses in "The Son" (LS) for sexual intercourse. The speaker longs to know what life was like for his prehistoric ancestor and imagines both continuity and change. The final image of modern mankind's intellectual, scientific nightmares, nightmares from which it, unlike the prehistoric man, cannot awaken, shows that evolution has not brought freedom from fears. The idea of progress is ambiguous.

Speculations about future evolution appear in poems like "Out There" (LS) and "Night Sky" (F), both of which imagine a race of advanced beings in intergalactic space. Those in "Night Sky" have advanced from the human to "god-

head," a strangely Miltonic idea, while those in "Out There" seem to belong to the quantum world: they are insubstantial, for example, and see not shapes but the distance between them. Thomas speculates that "the human virus" is the object of their experiments, being observed through their minds' "growing microscope" and incinerated "in the fierceness of their detachment." Future evolution is most often progress in Thomas, but occasionally he foresees human beings bringing disaster upon themselves through war, especially nuclear war, as in "Formula" (EA). Then, evolution would begin over again.

A second way that Thomas signals a more accepting view of science lies in his vision of the complementarity of science and art, science and religion, a vision of unity influenced by his reading in the new science, especially The Tao of Physics, which explores the similarities between modern physics and Oriental mysticism. Science and art are equal partners in the human enterprise in poems like "Iago Prytherch" (PS), which mentions "science and art, / The mind's furniture," as both absent from the unfortunate peasant's wind-swept skull. "Decline" (YO) describes how a declining nation sees "art, / Science, too, in recession / From their borders," while other, healthier nations display "The muse and calculus / In alliance." Thomas believes that "scientists, too, in mathematics, are engaged in modes of expression which differ only to a degree from those of artists in the broadest sense."[47]

That science and religion are alternative paths to God is a belief Thomas articulated in a 1990 interview: "If pure science is an approach to ultimate reality, it can differ from religion only in some of its methods. It would appear that, following the genetic coding, some are born with a make-up that will lead them along scientific paths to ultimate reality, while others will tend to be religious," by which he means "a religious specialist."[48] This belief is expressed in "Mediations" and "Dialectics," discussed above, and also in "They" (WI). The scientists in this poem are "The new explorers," whose world encompasses the parallel depths of sub-atomic and inter-galactic space. They are also "the new // linguists," whose language is mathematical symbols. The poem suggests in two ways that their activities are parallel to those of the religious person. First, "they interpret absence / as presence, measuring it by the movement / of its neighbours," as, for example, astronomers deduce the existence of an invisible stellar body by its gravitational effect on neighbouring bodies. Interpreting absence as presence is what the poet himself is doing with respect to God in other poems from the 1970s and 1980s. Second, the poet concludes that just as he attempts through prayer to decipher God's obscure message, so the scientists through their own methods are working at "breaking that abstruse code." To understand the universe is to understand

God's message. Davies has written that "the laws of physics are like a cosmic code, a 'message' cryptically buried in the data of our observation," a code that the scientist must "crack" in order to "uncover the hidden order."[49] Thomas would remove the quotation marks around "message."

The parallel paths of science and religion are demonstrated in the poetry on the level of metaphor and vocabulary. Thomas frequently uses scientific metaphors for religion and religious metaphors for science, as shown earlier. Even when the metaphors are critical (God as a mad scientist, scientists as priests in a false religion of death), the very comparison acknowledges a link. However, often Thomas uses crossover metaphors and words to express a harmony of science and religion. In "Destination" he sees as humanity's intellectual goal a vision of "science / transfiguring itself in love's mirror." The participle, which alludes to the Transfiguration of Christ, suggests that science becomes holy when it sees itself in relation to God. In "Emerging" the poet begins by depicting a scientific procedure (a blood transfusion) in religious terms (as a Eucharist), and ends by describing God and a religious journey in scientific terms (the New Jerusalem as a laboratory of the spirit). The effect in this poem is to see a harmony and "merging" of science and religion on the level of language, comparable to the merging, on a different level, of God and the poet in prayer, a union that the poem describes.

The poet's scientific vocabulary in his search for God becomes in "The Absence" (F) another example of the parallel between science and religion, in that the language of both in prayer proves inadequate to call God into his life:

> I modernise the anachronism
>
> of my language, but he is no more here
> than before. Genes and molecules
> have no more power to call
> him up than the incense of the Hebrews
>
> at their altars. My equations fail
> as my words do.

Yet the poem itself contradicts this failure by turning to a technical, scientific term as metaphor for the spiritual condition that will call God to him: "What resource have I / other than the emptiness without him of my whole / being, a vacuum he may not abhor?" The vacuum will be successful where the gene was not, and so, on the level of metaphor, the poem contradicts its own conclusion.

Science begins as a minor motif in the polyphonic symphony of Thomas's work, a few notes here, a phrase there.

It is only in the second movement, so to speak, in the work written after 1970, when the poet deepens and intensifies his search for knowledge and experience of God, that he also begins to engage more seriously with science, both as a subject and as a source for imagery and metaphor. Science becomes a major theme, which at first works mostly against the dominant religious theme. The poet sees science and scientists as opposed to God, spirit, life, and love and other human values. This is especially so when he sees science in the light of the old paradigm and when he links science with "applied science," technology, and the development of nuclear and other weapons.

This countertheme or theme in a minor key continues to be heard into the latest works, but beginning especially with Laboratories of the Spirit in 1975, the scientific theme harmonises more and more with the religious. The poet uses scientific imagery to express his religious experiences and understandings, both painful and joyful, and he meditates on the interface between scientific and religious insights. Science becomes, like myth, a tool with which to explore the nature of God, a language in which to talk about God. It is combined with myth at first but then largely replaces it. Thomas achieves at times a unity of vision in which science and religion are both paths to knowledge of God, whose expression is nature. This more harmonious view is influenced by the new paradigm of science, which stresses unity and interrelationship, subjectivity and holism.

Science is a flexible poetic tool for Thomas, able to express some of the conflicting apprehensions that create the tensions in his work: the absence and the presence of God and of meaning in human experience; nature devoid of God and nature as the "body of God"; the capability of human reason to comprehend something of God and to touch him and reason's utter irrelevance as a path to divine knowledge or encounter. The new paradigm in particular accommodates his beliefs in immanence, ecology, mystery, the limited nature of human expressions of truth, and the multiplicity of paths to God.

Thomas's work points out a fruitful direction for future development in poetry and in religion. John Magnum's view that the church should be discussing "doctrinal understandings implied by the theory of evolution and the world view of quantum physics and the theory of relativity" in order to speak to a scientific and technological society and avoid being ignored as irrelevant[50] echo Thomas's own reasons for engaging with science in poetry, quoted earlier. Thomas goes on to say,

> With science and technology so enormously influential, spawning as they do new words everyday, and with the decay of traditional beliefs in God, soul and the after-life, surely what England should be

> waiting for is a poet who can deploy the new vocabulary and open up new avenues, or should I say airwaves of the spirit in the twenty-first century.[51]

He is himself such a poet. Thomas employs science in his poetry with confidence, imagination, and intelligence. His skillful incorporation of the language and concepts of modern science into poetry, especially into religious poetry, is his most original contribution as a religious poet.

## Notes

[1] Herbert Friedman, The Astronomer's Universe: Stars, Galaxies, and Cosmos (New York: Norton, 1990) 14.

[2] Paul Davies, God and the New Physics (London: Dent, 1983) 180. This limit of human sight is called the "light horizon." Anything lying beyond the light horizon is too far for its light to have reached earth, so it cannot be seen yet.

[3] Fritjof Capra and David Steindl-Rast with Thomas Matus, Belonging to the Universe: Explorations on the Frontiers of Science and Spirituality (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) xi-xv.

[4] Capra and Steindl-Rast 69-74.

[5] R. S. Thomas, "Words and the Poet," Critical Writings on R. S. Thomas, ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: Poetry Wales, 1982) 84-5.

[6] R. S. Thomas, "A Frame for Poetry," TLS 6 Mar. 1966: 169.

[7] R. S. Thomas, "The Creative Writer's Suicide," The Selected Prose of R. S. Thomas, ed. Sandra Anstey, intro. Ned Thomas (Bridgend: Poetry Wales, 1983) 174.

[8] R. S. Thomas, interview, 21 Mar. 1978, quoted in Sandra Anstey, "A Study of R. S. Thomas's Literary Achievement, with a Full Bibliography," diss., U of Wales, Swansea, 1981, 210.

[9] R. S. Thomas, "Probings: an Interview with R. S. Thomas," by John Barnie and Ned Thomas, Planet 80 (1990): 44.

[10] Thomas, "Probings" 43.

[11] Capra and Steindl-Rast xi-xv.

[12] Capra and Steindl-Rast 69-76.

[13] N. Katherine Hayles, The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984) 22.

[14] Thomas, "Probings" 43, 46.

[15] This connection is implicit in Capra and Steindal-Rast xiv-xv.

[16] Fritjof Capra, The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism, 2nd ed. (Boston: New Science Library-Shambhala, 1985) 146, 150.

[17] Strictly speaking, geometry is a part of mathematics, but for ease of distinguishing between operations with numbers and operations with geometric forms, I will use "mathematics" to refer to the former and "geometry" to refer to the latter.

[18] R. G. Collingwood, The Idea of Nature (1945; New York: Oxford UP, 1960) 52.

[19] Benjamin Farrington, Greek Science: Its Meaning for Us, revised ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) 49-50.

[20] Marjorie Nicolson, The Breaking of the Circle: Studies in the Effect of the "New Science" upon Seventeenth Century Poetry (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern UP, 1950) 38.

[21] Galileo, quoted in Collingwood 102.

[22] Johannes Kepler, quoted in Carl Sagan, Cosmos (New York: Random, 1980) 56.

[23] Collingwood 157.

[24] Paul Davies, The Mind of God (New York: Simon, 1992) 93, 140.

[25] Hugh MacDiarmid, "In Memory of James Joyce," Complete Poems 1920-1976, ed. Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken, vol. 2 (London: Martin Brian & O'Keefe, 1978) 802-3.

[26] William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads (1800)," English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, 1967) 320.

[27] Ananda Coomaraswamy, "Why Exhibit Works of Art?" Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art (New York: Dover, 1956) 12.

[28] Leon Lederman, interview, "Science, Voices from the Past," Greek Fire, SCN, Saskatoon, 22 Oct. 1991.

[29] J. G. Crowther, British Scientists of the Twentieth Century (London: Routledge, 1952) 147.

[30] Paul Davies, God and the New Physics (London: Dent, 1983) 17.

[31] Davies, New Physics 101, 132.

[32] Davies, New Physics 65.

[33] Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1959) 237.

[34] Arthur Eddington, The Nature of the Physical World (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1928) xi-xiv.

[35] Thomas, "Probings" 43.

[36] R. S. Thomas, "Unity," Planet 70 (1988): 33.

[37] Hayles 19-21.

[38] Thomas, "Probings" 52.

[39] Davies remarks that physicists now tend to be holistic and biologists reductionist (New Physics 64).

[40] Capra and Steindl-Rast 12.

[41] Aldous Huxley, Literature and Science (London: Chatto, 1963) 13-14. In fact, even scientific language cannot be made so precise. Language seems to have an inherent multivalence, and the positivist view of scientific discourse has been shown to be inaccurate (Joseph W. Slade, "Beyond the Two Cultures: Science, Technology, and Literature," Beyond the Two Cultures: Essays on Science, Technology, and Literature, ed. Slade and Judith Yaross Lee [Ames: Iowa State UP, 1990] 10).

[42] C. P. Snow, The Two Cultures: and A Second Look: An Expanded Version of The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969) 14-15.

[43] R. S. Thomas, "Anybody's Alphabet," Planet 90 (1991/1992): 20.

[44] Davies, New Physics 111.

[45] Moelwyn Merchant, R. S. Thomas (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1979) 13-14.

[46] Stephen Jay Gould, "To Be A Platypus," Bully for Brontosaurus: Reflections in Natural History (New York: Norton, 1991) 276.

[47] Thomas, "Probings" 51.

[48] Thomas, "Probings" 43.

[49] Davies, Mind 174, 148.

[50] John M. Mangum, preface, The New Faith-Science Debate: Probing Cosmology, Technology, and Theology, ed. Mangum (Minneapolis: Fortress; Geneva: WCC, 1989) vi.

[51] Thomas, "Probings" 47.

# Conclusion

The religious poetry of R. S. Thomas describes the journey of a sensitive, intelligent man through the spiritual waste land of twentieth-century Western society, seeking understanding of human life, knowledge and experience of God, and the meaning of his vocation as a priest. His spare, honest poems arise from the tensions and dichotomies of his own experience and religious thought. A Welsh nationalist priest of the Church in Wales (originally the Church of England) and priest to a people who often reject him, he is torn by the contradictions of human life and by questions about the nature of the God who created a world in which there is suffering. His understanding and experiences of this God encompass opposites such as absence and presence, faith and doubt, and personal and impersonal concepts of God, although the tension between these dichotomies is sometimes transformed into unity on another level, through paradox, inclusion, and complementarity.

Thomas's integrity, his courage in facing hard questions, his faithfulness to the complexity of life and religious faith, and especially his anguished expression of the pervasive modern experience of the loss and absence of God make him a religious poet able to speak to many among a modern skeptical audience. So also does his unorthodoxy and his general avoidance of doctrine and specialised religious vocabulary and references, except for biblical allusions. Thomas's experience of God's love and presence and his suggestions of both the possibility of faith and the nature of that faith gain power and credibility in coming from a poet who has faced despair and doubt. As Helen Gardner wrote of T. S. Eliot, whose poetry Thomas admires and has been influenced by: "If Four Quartets shows scepticism integrated into faith, it shows scepticism none the less; and in a sceptical age it speaks to those whose scepticism stops at the question, and to those who are led to denial, as well as to those who are led to believe."[1]

Thomas's poetry is also deeply concerned with tradition, with the "presence of the past," both Christian and literary (the two, of course, overlap). He seeks a way to be both modern and traditional by re-presenting, renewing, and reinterpreting traditional Christian symbols (for example, the journey), myths and parables (Creation, the Fall, or the parables of the lost pearl and of the treasure in the field), and metaphors (God as wild animal), often with the assistance of insights drawn from modern theology and science. Traditional methods of experiencing God, like the

apophatic way of negation, and traditional understandings of prayer as waiting and as union with God are also presented in poems that make the past present in the language of the present. Moreover, the poet finds new metaphors for God and religious experience in birdwatching, for example, or in technology and science. Besides employing emblematic techniques, fables, allusions to literary predecessors, and the plain style, Thomas also contributes to such English poetic traditions as the priest-poet, mythic poetry, and prayer-poetry.

Thomas carries out the duty of the traditional poet, especially the traditional religious poet, to renew and extend his tradition, a task particularly important in an age in which Christian tradition has lost much of its power to move and speak to its hearers. His success in expressing religious concepts, symbols, and experiences in modern language is not unqualified, in part because of his extensive use of biblical allusion, much of which a modern audience largely unfamiliar with the Bible would miss, in part because religious tradition, by its nature, has roots in the past, which do not disappear when it is reinterpreted. One who is unaware of Thomas's biblical--and classical--allusions, of the many associations of the symbols, and of the past that is being made present, will inevitably miss the full impact of the poems.

Still, Thomas achieves a large measure of success in his re-presentation and renewal of tradition. Especially significant in this regard is his deliberate engagement with science, the dominant methodology and body of knowledge in the modern West. In bringing the language, metaphors, images, and concepts of science into the discourse of religious poetry, Thomas effects a dialogue and, in some poems, a rapprochement among science, poetry, and religion that future religious poets can fruitfully exploit. He finds an effective way of speaking about God and religious experience by incorporating the language of religion's often bitter, prestigious opponent into his poetry. Thomas's efforts draw on those of certain contemporary scientists who are exploring the interface between science, especially physics and cosmology, and religion. His ideal of unity, itself influenced by holistic scientific theories, finds expression in a vision of science as one of many paths to God and thus as a fundamentally religious activity. Of his many contributions to British religious poetry, Thomas's intelligent use of science is the most important.

The scope and achievement of Thomas's religious poetry mark him as the central Christian poet of later twentieth-century Britain and one of the major figures in English religious poetry in this century. His work represents a significant renewal of Christian poetry in the inhospitable environs of the modern age.

## Notes

[1] Helen Gardner, The Art of T. S. Eliot (New York: Dutton, 1950) 68.

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